A SAPPHIC RETELLLING OF BLUEBEARD

# BRIDE OF LADY BLUEHEART

EDIE MARR

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**EDIE MARR**

BLACKMARR BOOKS

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# THE BRIDE OF LADY BLUEHEART

***I must marry Lady Blueheart. And being her wife is death.***

*I have no choice in the matter. Lady Blueheart chose me and her word is law in her lands.*

*And, I soon discover, in her bedchamber too.*

*I will be taken to her castle, high on the Mountains, surrounded by dangerous forests. I'm wife number nine. No one else seems to think it suspicious that Blueheart has been widowed eight times, but I am certain her wives suffer a terrible fate.*

*Is this fate connected to the mysteries I uncover in the castle? Why are there no guests at our wedding in the castle chapel? Why is the castle so dusty and covered in cobwebs? Why are the maids all mute? And what's in the room at the top of the High Tower?*

*And most importantly, will I escape handsome, demanding Lady Blueheart, or does fate have something even stranger in store for me?*

***A dark sapphic fairy tale romance.***

# CONTENT NOTE

Please note that this is a dark fairytale romance and contains dark scenes and themes.

This book is a fantasy for entertainment and the behaviour of the characters is not something anyone should do in real life.

# FOLLOW EDIE MARR

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1

# SHE MURDERS THEM

"I am telling you she murders them," I shout down drunkenly from my position, standing on the tavern table. Someone boos me. Some others jeer, but I keep going. "What else could possibly have happened to eight wives? *Eight!*"

A sea of ruddy, drink-sodden faces look up at me, some are bemused, many more are downright angry.

"No, really, listen," I say, lifting my cup of ale to my lips. I keep speaking while I'm drinking, burbling out, "We need to stop letting her take wives. Being her wife is death." I sway, I am very drunk. "One dead wife is unfortunate, two dead wives looks like a curse, but eight! Eight means she's a fucking murderer."

I realise that I'm not just swaying, I'm losing my balance, too late to save myself as I cant sideways and flop into the crowd.

Who considerately part so I land on the stone floor of the tavern.

On my ass.

I make an *oofing* sound, winded. The crowd cheers at my misfortune. Someone pours the contents of a cup over me. "Waste of good ale," I mutter as it drips down my face.

"That's quite enough of that, Seri," says a voice as someone, perhaps two someones pick me up and throw me out of the tavern door into Dulcia Square.

"I'm just trying to save you from a murderer," I yell as the doors slam shut and a cold wind whips across the square.

And that was my last ever night in Dulcia.

2

# DULCIA HALL

"Seri!"

Luna's voice gets louder. I sigh and bury myself under the blankets. The iron bed creaks.

It's colder in my bedchamber than it's been for a while. Summer's definitely over. I don't want to get out of bed.

I drank far too much last night and my body aches from… something…

…Ah, yes, falling off a table and being thrown into the street by the ignorant people of this miserable town.

"*Seri!*" Luna shoves the blankets back so she can put a hand on my shoulder and shake it. I squeal with horror as cold air finds my bare flesh. "Come on, Seri. They want their breakfast trays half an hour early this morning. Remember?"

I make a groaning noise and sit up. My tiny garret room is tucked in the eaves of Dulcia Hall. It has bare boards on the floor and a low, sloping roof. And right now it smells like sex. Like it always does when Luna's slept here with me.

*Oh yes, last night hadn't been a total disaster had it?*

I'd staggered home to find my lover, Luna, waiting in my bed.

Standing over me, looking down, Luna smiles at me. She's very sweet, Luna. Too good for me, really. And far too good to be a kitchen maid in Dulcia Hall. I used to be the kitchen maid here and I know it's hard, filthy work.

I reach out for Luna. She's close enough that I can grab her waist and pull her down onto the bed for a kiss. She makes a yelp of protest but her soft, sweet lips press against mine and I moan, desire sparking inside me, even though there isn't time to do anything about it right now. Luna's already dressed in her maid's uniform and I can feel the rough fabric on my sleep-warmed skin. I hook a bare leg around the backs of her thighs and try to pull her down onto the bed.

This is where Luna decides enough is enough and pulls back and out of my grip.

"Seri!" She says. "Seri! We need. To go. *Get. Up!*" She slaps my naked flank. Hard. It stings in a way I find distinctly sharp and pleasant. My cunny twitches with interest.

"Ow," I say, snatching at her wrist. I look into her pale blue eyes. "You know, if you want me to get up, you shouldn't do stuff that turns me on."

"Don't be such a wretch," Luna laughs, pulling her arm back. "And I am going downstairs. If you want to get the switch for being late, stay there, but I'm not joining you on the punishment block. You know how eager Cook can be with that switch."

I whine, but Luna is right, Cook will use any excuse to give one of the maids in her charge a dose of her switch. So I climb naked from the bed, thinking that I wouldn't mind taking the switch if Luna was wielding it. And if she kissed me better afterwards.

I notice Luna watching me as I walk across to the dresser, splash some water on my face and start to dress. There's one tiny window in the garret. The sun is starting to rise behind the Blue Mountains.

"I can't believe those spoiled bitches are making me get up early just because there's a Bride Selection this morning. Anyone'd think they wanted to be selected as Lady Blueheart's new bride," I say as I wash my face.

"Of course they do. It's an honour," Luna says from the doorway. "To be the Lady of Blueheart Castle and all the lands of the Blue Mountains."

"A great honour," I scoff. "A great honour to be taken away to that massive castle in the middle of the forest and never see your family again." I pick up my hairbrush. "And probably ending up murdered by Lady Blueheart."

"Seri!" Luna looks quite shocked.

"This will be her ninth wife. What happens to them?" I know that no one but me in the entire town of Dulcia thinks Blueheart does anything

untoward with her wives. Most people seem to believe the line that she's just unfortunate. Or the less popular explanation that she was cursed by a witch. But I say the real answer is far more simple. I was saying it in the tavern last night, no one is that unfortunate. Curses are just convenient excuses. I turn and fix Luna with a serious expression. "I say, she murders them."

Luna laughs. "In that case, you should be careful," she says, coming over to where I'm brushing my hair and sliding her arms around my waist. "You're eligible this year. Maybe I'll be calling you 'My Lady' by nightfall."

"I doubt that. I might be eligible, but I think I'm safe. Blueheart isn't going to take a chambermaid to wife. When she comes to Dulcia for a Bride Selection she only chooses high-born women."

Luna kisses me on the cheek. "But what if this is the year she changes her mind? What if she finds out you're spreading terrible gossip about her and decides you're next to be whisked off to her murder castle?"

I laugh back, "Unlikely," I toss down the hairbrush. "But if it wasn't for the fact she murders her wives I wouldn't mind it. Lady Blueheart is, well, she's pretty attractive."

"*Lady* Blueheart. You know," Luna lowers her voice. "They say she is *no lady*. "

"I think that's part of the appeal," I say. "Now come on, or we'll both be late."

There are so many rumours about Lady Blueheart, many more than the ones I start. She fascinates everyone. The Blueheart Family who live in the castle high in the Blue Mountains control all the lands around here. Not just the town of Dulcia but many more, all the way to the White Eye River. The current Lady Blueheart has been our liege lord for over twenty years since I was a tiny baby. She is rarely seen in Dulcia. She only ever comes to the town to select a new bride.

There are rumours of old magics at Blueheart Castle. Strange traditions that have lasted centuries and must be obeyed. Whoever is the liege lord in that castle must have a wife chosen from the women of Dulcia or the lands around the mountains will fall to ruin. I don't know if that's true. But if it is, maybe Lady Blueheart should stop murdering them.

Some people say Lady Blueheart will only be free of the strange curse she is under when she finally finds a bride who will love her. That all her

wives have been unsatisfactory in some way. And that when she finally finds the right bride all will be well. I say, this might be true, but also that she's a monster. Completely unlovable. And in her rage, she ends up killing the women she takes to wife.

Once I am dressed in my starchy grey frock and apron, Luna and I clatter down the back stairs of Dulcia Hall all the way to the kitchen, where Luna vanishes off into the scullery and I collect the breakfast trays for Duke Dulcia's three daughters.

His three *surviving* daughters. His eldest, Peronel, was married to Blueheart three years ago. Her death, claimed to be of winter pox, is the reason for today's Bride Selection.

The rumour is that this year she will take Rosemary, Duke Dulcia's second-born daughter.

Rosemary is much nicer to me than Peronel ever was. Peronel was spiteful and spoiled. Always mean to me, making belittling comments and criticising my work. Mocking me and calling me a bastard foundling, making nasty remarks about how it was no surprise my mother didn't want me. More than once she told a lie about me that got me a switching and one time she managed to get me lashed and put in the pillory in Dulcia Square for a day and a night.

I was almost glad when Peronel was chosen by Blueheart. Actually, no, I *was* glad. Selfishly. She didn't deserve to die, I suppose, but my life has been sweeter since she was taken away on Blueheart's horse.

But although I'm much more fond of Rosemary, she's still selfish and spoiled like all the Duke's daughters. I don't care for her, but she doesn't seem purposely out to spite me. What with that and Luna, my life has been really quite sweet lately.

Rosemary though, seems quite excited that she might be the one selected. She's tattling to me as soon as I step through the door about Lady Blueheart and how handsome she is, how tall and, of course, how *rich.*

I open the heavy pink brocade curtains in Rosemary's richly furnished bedroom.

Rosemary stretches in her nightgown as the sunlight dances over her bed. Her blonde hair tumbles down her back in messy waves. She is beautiful. I have to warn her.

I bring her breakfast tray over to the bed and say, "I will be back in a moment to fix your hair, My Lady, after I've delivered breakfast to your

sisters."

I cross the hallway with its polished floorboards and fine rugs and tapestried walls and deliver my trays of berries and bread to Rosemary's two younger sisters.

When I get back to Rosemary's room, I find Rosemary standing in front of a mirror holding up one of her finest gowns against her body. The gown is pink and white, covered in tiny pearls and trimmed with lace. She turns as I walk in, "Seri," she says, her pale cheeks flushed a pretty pink with excitement. "What about this one? It's very fine but is it too sweet for Lady Blueheart? Should I go for something lower cut?"

I tip my head to one side, assessing. "My Lady," I say, "perhaps you would like to consider a plainer gown? Something that would not draw so much attention at the Bride Selection?"

Rosemary frowns at me. "My goodness gracious, Seri. Why?"

I suck my bottom lip. "Because perhaps then she will not notice you, My Lady, and select someone else."

"Not notice me!" Rosemary drops her gown, her voice a shriek of anger. "Oh, Seri, you evil little witch. I know you are eligible this year. How could you be so underhanded? You wish to destroy my chances with Lady Blueheart by dressing me in rags."

I shake my head. "Please, My Lady. No. All that I want is to protect you. I think Lady Blueheart does something terrible to her brides."

"Oh, that silly talk. Don't think I haven't heard about your exhibition last night in the tavern. It's such a dirty trick, Seri and don't think we don't all know what you're trying to do. Scaring people off so you can be the one chosen. I've heard that you think she is very handsome." Rosemary puts her bunched fists on her small hips. "You're wasting your time with your silly rumours. She'll never choose you, Seri."

I sigh. I've heard this before, people claiming I say the things I do about Lady Blueheart because I want her for myself. "No please, listen to me. I'm not trying to get chosen. Far from it. I would never want to be chosen as Lady Blueheart's bride. I really do think she is murdering her wives. Do you ever wonder about what really happened to Peronel? Your sister? Did you ever visit her after she was taken? "

"No," Rosemary says flatly. "But she was busy. She was living the life of a fine high lady. She wouldn't have had time for the likes of us once she was married to Lady Blueheart."

“She doesn’t even let any of her bride’s families accompany her to the wedding. Didn’t you want to go to see your sister wed?”

“Seri, Lady Blueheart likes to have the weddings in the chapel in her castle. And everyone knows the forest on the mountainside is dangerous. I’ve heard an evil witch lives there, not to mention the trolls and bandits and wolves. It would be too dangerous for many of us to travel through the forest.”

“Did you even hear from her?” I say. My voice sounds like pleading. But I am pleading. I am pleading for Rosemary’s life. “Did you get any letters?”

“Peronel wrote to Father once or twice, I believe. She wrote of the wonderful time she was having with the finest food to eat and gowns to wear.” Rosemary narrows her eyes. “But if you insist, Seri. Come here. Help me choose what you think I should wear.”

I nod. “Thank you, My Lady.” I walk over to the wardrobe. Rosemary’s wardrobe is huge, with wide double doors. It’s almost like a small room. I step into it with a certain gown in mind. A simple grey one with a high neckline. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen Rosemary wear it, but I take care of all her gowns. I know exactly what’s in her wardrobe and there is only one that I would describe as plain. I reach deep into the back, past rails of lace and satin in bright colours.

Behind me, Rosemary says, “You’re a dreadful liar, Seri. It’s obvious you want to be chosen at the Bride Selection. Well, you won’t be. You shan’t even be there. How about that.”

I’m right inside the wardrobe, almost at the back of it, with the grey gown in my hands, when Rosemary gives me a hard shove. I cry out as I fall. Before I know what is happening Rosemary is on top of me, forcing me down onto the wooden floor. Fine gowns fall from the rails all around me.

I try to fight her off. But Rosemary holds me down. She grabs me by the hair and smacks my head against the back of the wardrobe, dazing me. My head swims as I hear Elaine and Sophie come rushing into the chamber through the adjoining doors.

“Rosemary,” says Elaine’s sweet voice, “we heard such a commotion. What is the matter?”

Sophie says, “What is happening? Did Seri hurt herself?”

“No, no,” grunts Rosemary, “help me shut her in here.”

“What?” I’m aware of Elaine, hovering over Rosemary’s shoulder. “What? Why?”

“She’s been spreading lies about Lady Blueheart,” Rosemary snaps. “She wants to make sure she gets chosen as her new wife. I’m going to stop her. I’m going to lock her in here so she misses the Bride Selection. Help me.”

Elaine and Sophie are still asking questions, Sophie laughing as if this is a game. But they help Rosemary, following her orders. I’m still dazed from hitting my head and I can’t fight all three of them. I’m helpless as I am forced right back into the wardrobe and the doors are slammed shut. I hear the key turn in the lock.

I get to my feet as fast as I can and hammer against the wooden doors. But the wardrobe is strong. Sturdy wood.

“Rosemary,” I yell, “Rosemary, please. It’s against the law not to attend the Bride Selection. Please. I’ll be lashed if I don’t go. *Rosemary*!”

“If you really think Blueheart kills her brides you should be glad not to attend,” Rosemary says, her voice full of triumph.

All three of them laugh.

3

# BRIDE SELECTION

I sit on the floor of the wardrobe. The Hall is quiet. Everyone has gone to the town square. It's stuffy and dark and very warm and I am surrounded by Rosemary's gowns, rustling around every time I try to change position. There is no way to stretch my legs out sitting down like this. My knees start to ache. I thought this wardrobe was vast when I was trying to find a particular gown at the back of it. Now I'm locked inside, it seems tiny.

I hope I'm not going to be in here too much longer.

I think about what Rosemary said to me. That if I'm so sure Blueheart kills her wives I should be glad not to attend the Bride Selection.

Perhaps I should be.

If I am lucky my absence from the Bride Selection won't be noticed. I'm not a very important person in Dulcia. And I doubt Rosemary or her sisters will point out the fact I'm not present.

If I'm caught, the punishment for not showing up is lashing. But surely I'd risk that to avoid death as Blueheart's wife? But the truth is, until I was locked up in Rosemary's wardrobe, not attending was not something I had considered for a moment.

Now, I can be sure, caught and punished or not, I'll definitely be back safe in my bed with Luna tonight and I should be glad of that.

I should.

Nevertheless, I cannot deny that I am disappointed.

And I think my disappointment stems, mostly, from not getting to see Lady Blueheart.

Blueheart only travels down to Dulcia for Bride Selection. We never see her any other time. She's not here for any festivals or feasts. This could be my only chance to see her for years. Perhaps forever if this new bride survives.

And I want to catch a glimpse of her. I do. Blueheart is simply the most attractive woman I have ever seen. Beautiful. Not beautiful like even the prettiest girls in Dulcia, but beautiful in her own way. In a way, I've never seen before. She is tall, with wide strong shoulders and long dark hair that she always seems to wear in a simple style, a braid down her back or some other fashion that does the job of holding it back from her handsome face, with its strong jaw, dark eyes and large nose.

She is strikingly attractive although she does not seem to care about her appearance at all. I can't imagine her ever wearing her hair in the elaborate piles of curls and twists that are currently popular for wealthy women in Dulcia who can afford chambermaids to spend hours arranging them. While I was locked in the wardrobe I heard Rosemary instructing Elaine to create such a style for her own head.

Blueheart doesn't dress like other noble women either. She wears male clothing. A rich fur cloak that makes her shoulders look even broader and high boots over leather riding breeches. She doesn't even travel to the Bride Selection in a carriage. She rides her own horse, sitting astride like a man. And when she takes her bride, she famously pulls her up onto that horse with her, to ride away with the young woman on her lap.

I squirm in the wardrobe at the thought. I cannot deny I am disappointed to be missing that sight and taking Luna to bed with my cunny hot from watching of it.

After a while, I lose track of time. My stomach draws tight and my mouth is dry. I try to fall asleep, but the wardrobe is too cramped and too stuffy and I cannot find a way to rest. In the end, I resign myself to waiting.

I don't know how much time has passed when I hear sounds on the stairs of Dulcia Hall, but I am glad of it. Rosemary and her sisters must be coming back. I sigh with relief.

But then I hear more voices. Male voices. Shouting my name. "Seri, Seri, are you here? Identify yourself."

“Please,” I call back. “Please. Help me. I’m in Rosemary’s bedchamber.” I hammer my fists on the wardrobe door, although I do not know who my rescuers could be.

I hear the door to the room open. People coming in.

More voices, voices I don’t recognise, saying, “In here. They said in here. The key is still in the door.”

There’s a scraping sound of the key turning in the lock of the wardrobe door.

The wardrobe doors open and the light dazzles my eyes. I look up at the crowd of figures surrounding me, as two thick arms take hold of me and drag me out of the wardrobe.

I am set on my feet on Rosemary’s fine white rug. My cramped legs wobble and I am glad of the two men holding me up.

Who are they? I look at the men. They wear the uniforms of the town enforcers. Their faces are familiar now.

*What’s happening?*

One of the men, who has the gold frogging on his shoulder of a superior rank, says, “Seri, maidservant of Lord Dulcia. You have been chosen in the Bride Selection for Lady Blueheart. Come now, quickly, you’ve kept the Lady waiting long enough.

Before I can say a word about this, I am marched, quick and rough, my feet barely making contact with the floor, out of the bedroom and down the stairs, through the wide entrance hall of Dulcia Hall and into the elegant courtyard.

It’s late afternoon. The air is brisk and the sky is grey. I am glad of the cool air on my skin. I feel sweaty and awkward. Red-faced from spending the day locked in a wardrobe.

It takes me a moment to realise who is standing in front of me in the bright floral courtyard at the front of Dulcia Hall.

I look up.

I look at her face.

Blueheart nods at me. She looks me up and down, assessing my body. She turns to one of the enforcers. “Put her on her knees,” she says to him.

“Please, My Lady…” I blurt out as I am forced onto my knees in front of Blueheart. The ground is dry and dusty here. Dotted with small stones that dig into my knees.

A cool breeze blows across the courtyard

“Ah, so I have finally found you, Seri.” She reaches out and takes hold of my chin. Suddenly, I feel even more wretched. My coarse grey gown and apron are crumpled, my hair is a state. I smell of stale sweat and though I did my best to relieve myself in one corner of the wardrobe and stay away from that spot, I am certain I smell of urine too.

“Yes, My Lady,” I say, looking up into her dark eyes.

“You were not at my Bride Selection,” she says in a soft deep voice.

“Please, My Lady, I was—” I begin.

But Blueheart cuts me off with a hard slap to my face. I fall silent, stunned and hang my head.

I look down at the ground in front of me and the toes of Blueheart’s familiar boots. My cheek is stinging, but I keep my hands down rather than nurse it.

“Duke Dulcia,” Blueheart says, “you enforce my laws here in Dulcia. Tell me, what is the punishment for an eligible maiden not attending a Bride Selection?”

I look up and Duke Dulcia glances at me with disgust. “A lashing,” he says plainly. “Twenty strokes. My enforcers show no mercy to anyone who disrespects the Bride Selection.”

“I think then, this wrongdoer should take her punishment.”

“Please, My Lady,” says Duke Dulcia, “I don’t understand. I thought you said you wanted this maiden for your new bride. Surely you do not wish your bride to be lashed in the town square like a commoner if that is the case.”

Blueheart gazes at me. I dare not speak. I am still not certain what is happening.

I am to be Lady Blueheart’s bride?

Me?

*Why on earth would she choose me?*

I don’t want this and I also don't want threatened lashing, but I am certain that if I speak now in my defence about missing the Bride Selection, especially if I blame the Duke’s daughters, I will only get more punishment. So I simply look pitifully at Blueheart and hope she will take mercy on me.

She does not.

She says, “Oh, no. I think justice ought to be done. The law is very important to me. And you,” she bends down. Her face is so close to mine.

She almost whispers in my ear, “You will need to be taught to obey if you are to be my wife. I’m sure you agree, Seri.”

I nod. I’m not sure if I agree but I can’t find the will to do anything else.

Without warning the Duke’s enforcers lift me from the ground, “Please,” I say, but no one listens. I am dragged out of the courtyard and along the main street of Dulcia to the town square.

4

# PUNISHMENT IN THE SQUARE

The square is garlanded with decorations for the Bride Selection. Leafy branches and flower garlands are draped from balconies. The Blueheart crest flutters in the breeze, flying from every window. There are still people everywhere. The taverns that line the square are overflowing. Market stalls are doing good business. Everyone is here for the feast that always follows Bride Selection.

I had been hoping for a good meal at the feast. Blueheart supplies the food herself and it is always the finest I have ever seen. Dulcia is a hungry place these last years. The last three harvests have been meagre and we have been relying upon Blueheart's generosity more and more.

I can already see some of the food laid out on the tables that line the streets around the square. Plates piled high with honeyed figs and sweet dumplings, cheese and bread and eggs.

But now I doubt I am going to get to taste any of it. I am going to spend the rest of the day on the punishment block. And after that…

*…Can it really be true? I am going to be Blueheart's wife?*

I suppose then I will not be hungry.

In Dulcia, lashings take place in the pillory, on a small raised platform in the centre of the town square, and the victim is usually left there until dawn after their punishment to add to their suffering.

I've been lashed once before. When Peronel got me into trouble. It had been a mere six strokes that time. That was bad enough. I don't want to find out what it's like to have to take twenty.

When I see the pillory and realise that, yes this is really happening, I make one attempt to explain what happened as I see Rosemary in the crowd of revellers. She gives me a frightened look, no doubt scared she will join me on the block if I give away what actually happened. But she has nothing to fear, as no one is listening to me.

I don't get further than a couple of words of protest, before one of the enforcers backhands me around the face, barking, "Silence, the prisoner will not speak."

I am dragged up onto the punishment block and shoved into the pillory. Its wooden frame securing me at neck and wrists. I'm forced into position and the top part of the pillory is pushed down and locked into position.

I twist, trying to find a way to escape.

"Oh, don't tire yourself out, sweet thing," says Blueheart behind me in her distinctive, deep voice. "It's not possible to get out until the pillory is unlocked."

"I know," I say bitterly.

Blueheart walks around the enforcers and comes to stand beside me. I look up at her from my position trapped in the pillory, as she says, "You've been punished here before?"

"I've been in the pillory before. Yes. For a lashing."

"You're very badly behaved, then. What crime did you commit?"

I pause. It was all Peronel's fault. Her fault I got caught. But I was guilty. I look at Blueheart. "I spread rumours."

Blueheart raises an eyebrow. "Rumours, really, about what?"

"You, My Lady."

Because that was what Peronel did to me. She told her father I had been spreading tales about Blueheart killing her wives. I feel cold in my stomach.

"I see. Then we will discuss these later. After all, we have plenty of time to review your behaviour and correct it. When you are my wife."

It's only then that, finally, it really sinks in. Somehow everything else, being locked in the wardrobe, being dragged out, forced to kneel in front of Blueheart, being brought here for a lashing, has stopped me really thinking properly about what is happening. Blueheart has chosen me. Even though I wasn't at the Bride Selection, she has chosen me. I'm going to be lashed in the pillory, and after that taken up through the forest to her castle in the Blue Mountains. I'm going to be her bride.

I look up at her. "Why me?" I say. "Why would you choose me?"

Blueheart laughs. “Why not you, Seri?”

“How did you even know about me?”

“I know of every maiden in Dulcia. And I choose whichever one I want.”

Blueheart turns to the enforcer behind her. I recognise him. He’s the one who always gives lashings to the unfortunates who are sentenced to them. He’s the one who gave me my lashing before. He’s holding a leather strap. “Please, my good man,” Blueheart says, “as Seri is to be my wife, I think I will do this myself.”

The enforcer nods. He looks a little disappointed to be denied his duty, but he holds out the lash to her and she takes it.

“Now, my dear Seri,” Blueheart says, “I hope after this you will learn to be an obedient wife.”

I hear her boots on the platform as she walks around behind me. The sun is already low in the sky, the cold scent of autumn in the air.

Behind me Blueheart says, “Dulcia, remind me. What is the sentence?”

Duke Dulcia looks up. He’s standing next to Rosemary and his other two daughters. A tall man with white hair. I know I can expect no mercy from him. From no one in Dulcia. “Twenty lashes for an eligible maiden not attending the Bride Selection,” Duke Dulcia replies.

“Very well,” says Blueheart. I am gripped, then, with pure horror as she lifts the skirt of my gown up onto my back, baring me in my stockings and long bloomers. The only thing between the flesh of my ass and the entire town of Dulcia is one layer of thin white cotton. “My Lady, please,” I beg. But no one pays me any attention.

I look down from the platform. There is a crowd around it, a throng of eager faces. Such a sight is unprecedented. Blueheart has chosen a new wife and decided to have her lashed at the punishment block. And to carry out the lashing herself, no less.

Every single person in the town would want to see this. As I look around I see many faces I recognise, staring at me. Some laugh and jeer, others just watch expectantly.

I am burning with shame.

I hear the boards of the platform creak behind me.

I try one last time to find a way out, some give in the pillory, something that would give me a chance to just explain, but there’s nothing I can do. I’m helpless and it's too late.

There’s a pause like a held breath and then the lash whistles, moving through the air, it's that air I feel first, then the jolt of impact and then the burn. The intense searing burn as it hits me, through my undergarments with such a heat that I feel like I am bare there. I yelp out in pain, the crowd cheers and barely have a moment to collect myself before I am lashed again.

Again, it burns like a line of fire across the flesh of my ass. I squirm against the wood of the pillory.

Blueheart lashes me again and I cry out loudly this time, a scream of pain.

My cry is answered by more jeers. The crowd is laughing. And they keep on laughing and cheering as I wail in pain under another stroke and then another.

“Yeah,” shouts someone. “About time someone taught that mouthy bitch to behave.”

Another says, “She should have been put in a scold’s bridle months ago.”

Another, someone I recognise from the tavern last night yells, “Hit her harder, My Lady. She’s been asking for this for a long time.”

“No,” I wail, “no please,” not sure if it would be possible for the strokes to get any harder.

Blueheart says, “As you wish. You know her better than I.” And she begins to strike me even more forcefully.

It’s a wall of pain hitting me now. The strokes blur into one another. Someone calls out, “Cut out her filthy lying tongue.” Which is met by feral cries of agreement.

“Her tongue?” Blueheart cries back. “I think not. I will be needing that.”

The crowd laugh.

And I squirm in the pillory and beg Blueheart to stop. “Please My Lady, please, have mercy. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

But she ignores me. All I can do is whimper and sob. The lashing goes on and on until I have tears on my cheeks. My tangled mussed hair is hanging in my face. I have to spit it out of my mouth.

“Please, Lady Blueheart, Please have mercy,” I beg again.

And this time I get it. Or perhaps the twenty strokes are over. The pillory is creaking with my struggles and the cheering crowd is even larger.

Blueheart walks back into my line of vision, holding the lash in her hand. She smiles at me. Her cheeks are flushed from the exertion.

"Well now, Seri. I hope that has taught you to obey the law."

"Yes, My Lady," I whimper, it comes out as half as sob.

"It seems many people of Dulcia feel that you deserved that."

"Yes, My Lady," I say, still sobbing. The lashing may be over but my whole body is burning with pain.

Blueheart uses the handle of the lash to lift my chin. I meet her dark eyes. "Am I to understand you are trouble? Perhaps I ought to treat you strictly when you become my wife."

I don't know what to say to that, but I find myself nodding tearfully.

"Leave her there," Blueheart says standing up. "I will collect her at dawn when her punishment is complete. Dulcia, I will take a room in your Hall tonight."

Duke Dulcia makes a strange sound at this. He seems quite overwhelmed by the honour. Blueheart never stays in the town overnight.

As Blueheart turns away from me I wail, "Please My Lady, please have mercy, do not leave me here all night."

Blueheart moves the lash aside and traces a finger over my jaw. "But dear wife, you are in no state now to mount my horse. I assure you. Your ass is cherry red."

I whimper. She's right. My ass feels like it is on fire. Getting on her horse right now would be agony. Nevertheless, I do not want to be left here on display all night.

But it seems, I have no say in the matter. I nod, hopelessly. A tear slips down my cheek.

Blueheart turns away from me and calls down to the crowd. "My Bride Selection is done. I will have this poor wretch. I will take her to Blueheart Castle at dawn and wed her in my chapel tomorrow night. And now, people of the town of Dulcia, I know life is hard for you. I know the harvests have not been fruitful. But tonight, you feast. I have brought food from my own stores for you, to thank you for your generous gift of a sweet bride for my bed."

The people cheer.

Blueheart turns back to me and gives me a kiss on my tear-stained cheek. In a whisper she says. "You will learn from this, I hope. If you are

not an obedient wife to me, you can expect many more lashings and worse besides."

"Yes, My Lady."

Blueheart walks down from the platform and vanishes off with Duke Dulcia. My stomach growls. I am so hungry and thirsty. But I know I will be lucky if anyone offers me as much as a sip of water while I am in the pillory.

It would be fair to say that Dulcia is a cruel town. Its people enjoy seeing wrongdoers punished in the square. Last time I was locked in this pillory for a day and a night after my lashing, passersby jeered and laughed at me. Said I deserved the pillory and more.

One of the town enforcers usually stands by the pillory when someone is being punished in it. And I know why. Without such a guard, the person in the pillory would face worse abuse than harsh words and exposure to the elements.

There are strict rules about the treatment of people in the pillory. It is meant for humiliation as much as anything. The person's crimes will be written on a sign so everyone passing knows what they have done and can mock them appropriately.

I have heard from other maids in Dulcia Hall that in some towns the pillory's victims get pelted with rotten food and worse, but that doesn't happen here.

And I am glad of it. The fact I am forced to stand here, hungry, thirsty and with my ass burning, held in the wooden frame, while the townspeople feast, is bad enough.

I am there all through the feast, with nothing to distract me from my hunger and thirst but the occasional drunken townsperson coming over to laugh at me, wave their bowls of meat and bread in my face, or taunt me by offering a sip of water or ale then taking their cup from my lips before I can take any and walking away, scoffing and telling me how much I deserve to be punished.

The town square starts to thin out eventually as the night grows darker and colder. I shiver in my maid's gown.

I almost gasp with pleasure when a cup is placed to my parched lips and this time, the cup's holder allows me a small sip of water. To my dry throat, it is pure nectar.

I look up. Blueheart stands there. She is wearing her fur cloak.

“I asked Duke Dulcia for more details about your other punishment in the pillory,” she says coolly. “He told me all about the lies you were spreading about me.”

She drops the cup of water on the wooden platform in front of me. I whimper to see it spilt there. Despite the tiny sip of water she gave me I am still hopelessly thirsty.

“He told me,”, Blueheart says, “you were telling people in taverns that I murder my brides.”

“Yes,” I say, “I’m sorry, My Lady.”

“I’m sure you are, but why would you say such a thing?”

“I don’t know My Lady.”

Blueheart grabs hold of a handful of my hair and grips tight. “Oh yes”, she snarls, “Oh yes you do. Tell me the truth. Tell me the truth or I will fetch that strap and that last lashing I gave you will seem like a sweet kiss. Why do you think such a thing about me?”

I look up at her. I fix her with the most defiant expression I can find. Cold and hungry and miserable as I am the threat of another lashing has galvanised me somehow. I say, “You have had eight wives in less than twenty years. I will be the ninth. What else could explain such a record?”

“It’s true, I have been very unlucky. But I assure you, all my wives have died from illness or accident.”

“Perhaps you are cursed, in that case,” I say. “Either way, being your wife is death.”

“Cursed? I have heard that rumour, even wondered if it could be true. Could you be the one to break my curse, Seri?”

Blueheart says this quite sincerely. I look up at her. “Truly? I say. Are you telling me there really is a curse? How could it be broken?”

Blueheart smiles at me.

“Tomorrow, sweet wife, you will find out. If you don’t freeze to death tonight.” She pauses and looks at me as if examining me for something. “Seri,” she says, “tell me something. Did you enjoy being punished?”

“My Lady, no. Why would I?”

“Are you sure, Seri? Are you sure such treatment didn’t make your sweet cunny burn?”

“I don’t know what you mean, My Lady.”

Blueheart kisses me on the cheek again. “Perhaps we can change that,” she murmurs in my ear.”

And with that, she pulls away. She walks down from the platform and vanishes into the dark.

I say nothing. I squirm in the pillory. Did I enjoy the lashing? I wonder if part of me did. Because if my cunny wasn't burning then, it is now.

5

# BLUEHEART CASTLE

The sun rises thankfully early. If this had happened to me in mid-winter again I don't know how I would have been able to stand it. By the time a small party approaches me on the punishment block, the pain from my lashing has subsided to a dull aching burn. Although I still do not relish the prospect of getting onto a horse's back for a ride up the mountains.

To enforcers step up onto the platform and release me from the pillory. I manage to straighten up my aching body.

Blueheart stands with Duke Dulcia, watching.

"Dulcia," Blueheart says, "as she is a runaway, I would like her chained. I don't want to lose her in the forest. It could be dangerous."

Duke Dulcia nods. "Very wise, My Lady." He signals to one of his enforcers. Who steps forward and manacles my wrists behind my back in heavy cuffs with a short chain between them.

This is unorthodox. I know Blueheart does not normally take her brides chained. I walk down from the punishment block with an enforcer's hand on each of my elbows and I am taken to stand with Blueheart under a flower garlanded archway in another part of the square for the claiming. The Bride Selection is usually marked by this short formal betrothal ceremony. It is brief, as the proper wedding always takes place at Blueheart's Castle, with no one from Dulcia in attendance.

Blueheart signs some paperwork that makes me officially her property and dissolves any other's claim to me from a Master or father, and we are

presented to the crowd. Usually, many more people watch this part of the Bride Selection, but it normally takes place in the late afternoon, right before the feast when the whole town is thronging the square.

Now, early in the morning, after a night of revelling, there are only a handful of people present.

The official claiming of me complete, Blueheart leads me by the hand to where her enormous brown mare is tied up outside the town stables. She mounts, swinging her leg high in the air and seats herself on the horse. Then she leans down and takes me by the waist. She lifts me into the air as easily as if I were made of paper. I am set in her lap, nestled close. It's truly wonderful to feel the heat of her body after my cold night.

Blueheart puts one arm firmly around me. She leans down to shake Duke Dulcia's hand. I will send you a little extra gold to cover the cost of acquiring a new servant, she says.

"Very generous My Lady," the Duke replies.

And then, with a loud shouted command that rips into the air, Blueheart urges her horse forward. The beast spins around and we are off. Out of the town. A town I have not left since I was a babe, and towards the path into the forest.

As the horse trots away I notice Rosemary, looking at me sourly. Despite her best efforts, it is me and not her who is to be Blueheart's wife

It's a long journey through the forest. Once we're under the trees, it is dark and cool and strangely forbidding. I've never been in the forest before. There are terrible stories about this forest and its dangers. No one from Dulcia ever ventures into the forest unless they must.

"My Lady," I say to Blueheart once the town is out of sight. "Please may I have something to drink?"

"Ah yes," Blueheart says, "you are still suffering from your punishment."

"Yes, My Lady, and before that I was locked in the wardrobe in Dulcia Hall for all of the day. Please have some mercy on me now my punishment is done."

"I suppose I shall be generous, as you are to be my wife."

As her horse trots on through the narrow dark path, trees looming up thickly on both sides, Blueheart reaches into a pack on the horse's side and pulls out a wineskin. She brings it to my lips and lets me drink my fill. It is a strong wine. It makes my head spin. I'm hungry too, but after a night in the pillory, all I want to do is sleep. I let my head lean heavy against Blueheart's chest.

I don't know what awaits me in Blueheart's castle, but somehow, on her horse, in her arms, I sleep.

When I wake up, Blueheart is whispering in my ear, "Open your eyes, Seri. It's time to see your new home.

I do as I am bid and find that Blueheart's horse is trotting up in front of a huge fortress of a castle. Several steep steps lead up to a front door twice the size of any door I've ever seen.

Blueheart Castle is sometimes visible from Dulcia Square on clear days. Although only its highest tower and then only when the mist clears. Those glimpses I have had of it have not prepared me for how truly vast and imposing it is.

A wide facade of black stone stretches in front of me. When I look up I feel like I can hardly see the top of it. I swallow.

"Here we are," Blueheart says.

She dismounts the horse with an arm around my waist, pulling me down with her like a piece of luggage. I wail in fear when I find myself in the air with my wrists still chained behind me. But Blueheart holds me steady and sets me on my feet on the gravelled pathway in front of the castle. When I look around, all I can see beyond the castle, in all directions, is more forest.

The grey sky seems to be darkening already. Blueheart puts an arm tightly around my waist and leads me with her, up the steep black steps to the castle's front door.

She shoves the door and it swings open. I follow her into a dark entranceway, cobwebbed and dusty like it's been abandoned for years. There seem to be few windows. The windows that there are, are so small and grimy they let in little light. Some candles are burning low in sconces on the wall, barely more than stubs.

Blueheart closes the door and the room gets even darker. I hear the sharp grind of a key as she locks it. I'm trapped. This place is a prison.

There is a noise at the top of the vast staircase. I look up and see two maids in long black gowns white aprons and high, frilled white collars.

Each of them holds a candle that lights their pale faces.

"Ah, there you are," Blueheart says. The maids say nothing but she continues, "I have here a new bride-to-be. Please take her and prepare her for the wedding ceremony."

The maids walk silently down the stairs. They nod to Blueheart and neither of them says a word. One of them, slightly taller with very shiny dark hair, takes my elbow in a tight grip. She nods at me and begins to lead me up the wide staircase.

I'm halfway up when Blueheart calls. "Give her some food and drink too. I don't want her passing out on me."

6

# WED

Upstairs I am taken down a dimly lit hallway and into a bedchamber. Heavy red curtains are drawn at all the windows and the walls are panelled in dark oak. The large bed has four carved posts of similar wood and a heavy red covering. The only light comes from a candelabra on the table and from a low fire. I am taken to the bed and without speaking the maids gesture that I should sit down on it.

One of them reaches behind me and unmanacles my wrists.

"Thank you," I say, bringing my hands in front of me with some relief. I rub my wrists.

Another of the maids leaves the room and comes back in with a long white wedding gown. It's very beautiful, glittering in the candlelight. It's covered in swirls of embroidery and tiny pearls and crystals. I reach out and touch it when the maid shows it to me. The bodice is stiff. It has strict corset boning inside. The sleeves are long and narrow. The waist is very small. I'm not sure it will fit me.

"Very nice," I say, politely.

The other maid nudges me. I turn to her and see she is holding out a tray with some dry bread and fruit and a pitcher of water. I take the water gratefully and drink a lot of it. Then I eagerly eat the bread.

"Thank you. Oh, dear Goddess of the Sky, I am so hungry."

The maids watch me eat. When neither of them says a word, I frown. "Can you talk?" I ask them. "Either of you?"

One of the maids, the one with black hair, shakes her head.

“Are you not allowed to speak or not able to speak?”

The black-haired maid shrugs.

Blueheart has mute maids? Or at least maids who are forbidden from speaking, or speaking to me. Somehow I’m not surprised. But it makes this unnerving experience all the more eerie.

I let the maids do as they have been bid. I let them strip me and bring bowls of warm scented water to wash me. When they bring me more bread and water I drink and eat happily and willingly. When, later, they bring me more of the strong wine and sweetcakes, I enjoy those too.

I let them brush my hair and pin it up into a complex woven pile on top of my head. I’ve never worn my hair like this. It takes an age to do. That done, they begin the process of lacing me into the tightly boned gown. The inbuilt corset is severe. I was right about the gown being too small. It takes my breath away. I can’t bend and I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to comfortably sit down wearing it. But when I ask the maids if the corset laces can be made a little looser, they shake their heads.

White lace stockings are rolled up my legs. I have never seen fabric so fine in my life. They are clipped to fixings inside the dress and my feet are slipped into fine silk shoes. Like the dress, the shoes are a little small for me. They pinch my toes and the heel is high. I’ve never worn shoes with such a heel before and my feet quickly start to ache. One of the maids crouches on the floor and fastens the buckles tightly. I squirm, in the tight corset, there is no way I can bend down to loosen the shoes myself. And I definitely can’t reach around to unfasten the dress. I’m trapped in this outfit as surely as I was trapped in those manacles.

And that’s before the other maid picks up those manacles, which are still lying on the bed. She starts to tug one of my wrists behind me. I pull it back. “No,” I say, quite sharply. “I don’t need those back on for my wedding, do I?” The black-haired maid shakes her head and pushes me backwards down on the bed. The other one stands up and helps her roll me onto my belly.

They begin to tug both my wrists into the small of my back. I fight them, but the tight gown makes it very difficult.

“Stop it,” I yell. “Stop it, please.”

“Is there a problem?” says a voice from the doorway. I turn my head as best I can from my position face down on the bed. Another woman stands there. She’s slender but quite tall. From the way she’s dressed, in formal

dark livery, slim breeches and a jacket with gold buttons, I think she must be Blueheart's butler. At least she can talk.

It seems the maids can't or won't speak to her either, because neither of them answer her as she walks in.

"You must be Miss Seri," she says to me. "I understand you are to be the new Lady of Blueheart Castle."

"Yes," I say from my position being held down on the bed. "Yes, I am and these maids are trying to manacle my wrists for my own wedding."

"I see. Miss Seri, let me introduce myself. I am Alton, the butler here at Blueheart Castle and I'm sure I can deal with this matter for you. Are they not applying them correctly?"

"What?" I splutter. "Not applying them correctly? What do you mean? I do not want them on at all."

"I'm sure you don't," says Alton smoothly. "But I believe Lady Blueheart brought you here wearing them."

"Yes," I say, struggling to have a conversation while I'm being held down on the bed, "But they took them off."

"Who took them off?" says Alton. Still speaking very calmly as she crosses the room to the bed to stand over me as I lie prone, still held in place by the maids.

"Them," I say to Alton, who is now standing beside the bed. I'm getting exasperated. "The maids."

"Well," Alton says, as if speaking mostly to herself. "They had orders to wash you and dress you for your wedding. I don't think that would have been possible if you were manacled. But as Lady Blueheart gave no instruction for you to be set free from your bondage, the maids are simply doing what needs to be done. And returning you to the state in which Lady Blueheart has put you. I am sure she has her reasons and she will be the one to release you when she decides it is right."

I barely take this in as Alton takes the manacles from one of the maids and while they hold my wrists together, she snaps them into place. I gasp. Alton, or someone, I can't really see who, pulls me up onto my feet and turns me around. Alton bends a little to look at me. She's taller than me even in the uncomfortable heeled shoes.

She pushes a loose tendril of hair back from my face and says, "Miss Seri, I would advise you to obey Lady Blueheart. Do whatever she asks. No matter what. Don't make her angry."

I look up, I look her in the eye. “Why not? Because she’ll murder me?“

Alton says, “Because you are her wife.” She takes a step back and looks me up and down in the tightly corseted gown I can barely move in, with tight shoes pinching my feet and my arms chained behind my back. ”Well now. I think you’ll do.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m really going to be taken to my wedding like this?

I swallow and look back at Alton, holding her gaze. Her eyes are very pale blue. All of her is pale. Her hair is white blonde.

I take a breath and say to her, “I will not *do*. I don’t think it’s appropriate for a bride to go to her wedding in chains as if she is unwilling.”

Alton looks at me with an extremely stern expression. “*Unwilling*,” she says slowly as if the word horrifies her. “Dear Miss Seri, I fear you have not listened to a word of my advice, we do not concern ourselves with things like that here in Blueheart Castle. Lady Blueheart’s word is law. Her bidding is always appropriate.”

“It certainly is,” says a familiar low voice.

Alton turns to the voice and I follow her gaze. Blueheart stands in the doorway. She wears male dress as usual. More formal than I have seen before. A deep blue frock coat, that highlights her eyes, and a white shirt with a frothy white cravat. I swallow. Her long hair is pulled back from her handsome face in a typical simple style. I notice her dark eyebrows and high cheekbones as if seeing her for the first time. She looks quite stunning.

She wears her usual high black boots over tight white breeches that enhance her powerful thighs. My eyes drift up from them to the centre of her body. My mouth is dry.

Blueheart walks over to me, casting her eyes up and down. Assessing me just as I was assessing her.

She touches my chin. “I am sorry if you find it awkward to be chained for our wedding, my sweet Seri. But you tried to avoid my Bride Selection. You were once lashed for spreading lies about me in Dulcia. I do not trust you yet.”

I look her in the eye. Something crackles between us. Gooseflesh rises on the backs of my arms inside the tight sleeves of the dress. “You think I would run from here?”

“I don’t want you dead in the forest,” Blueheart whispers. “They’re very dangerous. Full of… *beasts*.”

“Then do you normally wed your brides in chains? To protect them from the beasts of the forest?”

“Oh no, just you, my precious.” She leans close and kisses me. Heat flares inside my body as our lips touch. She tastes smoky, a little of drink and slightly sour. It's strangely delicious. I want to open my mouth to the touch of her tongue, but I resist. I keep my lips firmly closed. I don’t want to give her the satisfaction of knowing that, despite everything, despite her treatment of me, I desire her.

Against my lips, she whispers. “And I will kiss that sweet cunny later.”

“You’re quite disgusting,” I return, but that statement has made the thought flare in my mind, her hot as a flame.

Blueheart reaches out and takes my jaw in her hand. She squeezes painfully tight., cocking her head to one side. “You are delightful, dear Seri, but I do not want your smart mouth spoiling the solemnity of a marriage ceremony. As I suspected, you require more reminders that I expect obedience. Alton, will you assist me with the gag please.”

“What?” is all I manage to say in my indignant shock as Alton moves closer. The maids, flanking me, each take hold of my shoulders. Blueheart’s fingers are in my mouth, prying my jaws open as Alton reaches over and pushes some kind of leather pad into my mouth. I make a noise of surprise at the strange sour taste of it.

Alton reaches around my head. The thick pad has a leather strap attached to it that she fastens behind my head. It’s tight. I probe the leather with my tongue. It will not move.

I make a sort of grunting noise and Blueheart says, “I heard them say in Dulcia that you deserved the scold’s bridle for your tongue, and I have to say I agree. Although, I do prefer this version to that heavy iron thing. I have not had to use this for a wedding for a long while, but I will not have our union ruined by insolence.” She touches my chin again. “This is how a wife ought to be. Beautiful and silent. And, just one final touch.” She turns to address the black-haired maid. “Ella, the veil, please.”

Ella passes Blueheart an armful of sheer fabric. It’s a fine lace and studded with small crystals. Extremely beautiful. Blueheart shakes it out and drapes it over my head. I gasp into the gag. The lace is dense enough that although it does not block the light, it hides a lot of the world from me.

Blueheart herself, standing close to me, becomes a dark shape, a blur, as she takes something else from one of the maids and I can tell from the feel of what happens next that she is pinning the veil in place.

I am trapped then in my own tiny world. Silenced and bound in place. And this is how Blueheart will take me to wed.

Blueheart grasps my arm and leads me from the room. We descend the stairs, which takes a lot of concentration from me with my vision so marred and my feet shod in uncomfortable shoes, pinching my feet painfully with every step.

We walk through the castle hallway and out into the grounds. It's cold, already dark. Lights dance at the edges of my vision. I think the path we are walking along is candlelit.

All the while, my heart is hammering hard inside my chest.

*This is really happening. I'm to be Lady Blueheart's ninth wife.*

The wedding itself passes in a blur. We enter what I take to be a chapel. A cold little space, with a stone floor and enough candles that the brightness penetrates my veil in a dazzling blur. At first, I think there is a priest, but as the ceremony begins, I realise that the celebrant is simply Alton. Saying the familiar words of the wedding ceremony.

At the points where I would be expected to say something, of course, nothing happens. I have no voice with the leather pad stopping my mouth. But otherwise, the wedding proceeds much as any other.

There are few people in the chapel. But more than just the two maids I have met. I wonder who they are. Who is witness to the manner in which I am being taken to wed?

When Alton finishes the final words of the ceremony, declaring us married, Lady Blueheart and wife, Blueheart lifts the veil. I blink at her. I am ashamed that whoever is in the chapel is seeing that I am gagged, but I do not get the chance to look around before Blueheart removes the gag, reaching behind my head and pulls me close into a kiss with one hand in my hair and the other at my back. She dips me, forcing me to bend backwards and let her bear down on me.

Again, heat flares inside me as I am overwhelmed by the musky, delicious taste of her. She smells good. A deep smoky scent that seems to flare old memories. I can't help letting her tongue slip briefly into my mouth, which makes her purr with satisfaction.

The people in the chapel pews applaud us. A thin sound from only a handful of people. Blueheart draws back from the kiss. She lifts the gag, brings it up to my mouth and with a very satisfied expression.

I gasp with surprise as the leather is forced back into my mouth by Blueheart's big thumb.

7

# THE WEDDING BED

After the wedding, I am led out of the chapel by Blueheart, her arm linked again around mine. She might have replaced the gag but my veil is still pulled back. I can see the tree-lined, candlelit path, twinkling and glittering as Blueheart takes me back to the castle. She leads me through the entrance hall and into a dining room. Like the bedchamber I saw upstairs, this room has wood-panelled walls and dark wooden furniture. There's a thick red and green rug on the floor. Despite this being a celebration, everything is dim and dusty. In the candlelight, I can see cobwebs garlanding the ceiling.

A feast is laid out on a long table in the centre of the room. Roast meats and fine white cheeses and berries and breads and honey.

Behind us, into the room follow the wedding guests. Now I can see them clearly, I realise that they are the castle staff. The two silent chambermaids who dressed me are there, with a couple of others, similarly dressed. There is Alton, straight-backed and serious. Three kitchen maids hang at the back.

This cannot be the entire staff for a castle of this size. Just a handful of maids and a butler. Although I suppose it is possible more remain below stairs. But why are there no other guests? Lady Blueheart is liege lord for all the lands that surround the Blue Mountains. Does she not invite any nobles to her weddings?

Of course, I cannot ask any of these questions. Blueheart, standing next to me, slides her arms around my waist. "And now, sweet wife, we are

married."

She taps a finger on the gag. "And perhaps I will even remove this when we are in the bed chamber." She reaches up and lifts the edge of the veil, still trailing down my back from when she lifted it from my face to kiss me. She takes it from my shoulders and replaces it covering my face.

I whimper as the room becomes a blur and all I can see is some spots of golden candlelight. Losing my ability to see again when I am already so helpless is overwhelming.

Blueheart tuts at me, trailing one hand down the side of my body, although I can barely feel it through the thick fabric and tight boning. "No, no, wife. No complaints from you, please. You're mine now. My sweet property. No one needs to see your face but me." She smooths down the fabric. My fingers twitch in the manacles.

Someone sidles up to us. When she speaks, I realise it is Alton. "Excuse me, My Lady, may I have a moment of your time."

I sense the dim shape of Blueheart turning away from me and hear her saying, "Now, Alton? I'm trying to enjoy my new wife."

Alton says, sounding quite sheepish. "I'm sorry, My Lady. It is important. I think the perimeter has been breached again."

"Again?" Blueheart sighs. "I see. Give me a moment." Blueheart leans in and kisses my cheek through the veil. "It seems I have been too preoccupied with you today, wife. Do excuse me."

And she leaves me like that. Standing bound and blind and gagged beside the table of food.

I wait. Under the veil, I feel like I'm in my own world. The gauzy fabric blurs the room, but I'm getting used to it and it's easier to see in this room with stronger light. I look around as best I can. The handful of maids in the room are helping themselves to food and mostly ignore me. None of them are speaking. The room is strangely silent.

Are all the maids unable to speak? Are they actually incapable of speech or just forbidden from doing so?

The whole castle, or all of it I've seen so far, is so shabby and poorly kept, I wonder what the maids spend their time doing. It's not dusting that's for sure.

My feet hurt in the tight shoes so badly now. Each of them feels like they're burning. I would love to sit down. I can make out what I think must be a chair, beside the fire. I know the tight boning of my gown will make it

hard to sit but I want to at least try. Walking feels perilous with my wrists still cuffed behind me and my vision restricted by the veil, but I take careful steps, reach the chair and drop into it in an ungainly heap.

The boning immediately pinches my waist so hard I struggle to get my breath. I wriggle around trying to get comfortable. I can't find a position where I'm not being pinched, but at least my feet are grateful.

I notice someone approaching me. I don't recognise them. Not one of the maids in their distinctive uniforms. Or Alton who is also a shape I can recognise through the veil now. I'm sure it's a woman. I cannot think who it could be. The shape gets closer and closer and before I know it, someone is lifting my veil.

I look up, blinking, slightly stunned by the experience of seeing clearly again. A woman, older than anyone else I've seen here is looking down at me. She's finely dressed in a purple gown. Her grey hair is piled up on top of her head. She has a small, pinched mouth.

A long elegant finger reaches out and taps the leather pad in my mouth.

"She's left you gagged, I see."

I nod.

The woman inspects me further. "And chained. Oh dear, oh dear. She is being cruel to you so soon. However, perhaps this is a good sign. Some of them, she seems bored of by the time she gets to the wedding breakfast."

I can't reply, so I simply gaze up at the woman, wondering who she might be.

She tilts her head to one side. "You know, looking at you, I do wonder." She still has her finger on my gag. "Perhaps you really could be the one. Wouldn't that be ironic?"

I don't know what this means. I hope she will say more.

"Get away from her," a voice shouts across the room. Despite the wild anger in the tone, I recognise it as Blueheart's right away, even before I look to see her in the doorway. She looks as livid as she sounds and is already racing across the room. "Get back. Get away." She grabs the woman by the shoulder and pulls her away from me, whirling her around.

"How dare you come here," Blueheart shouts in the woman's face. "How dare you set a single filthy foot in my castle on my wedding day, witch."

The woman laughs. "I do love attending your weddings, Blueheart," she says, calmly despite the anger vibrating off Blueheart. "You really do have

so much hope every time. It's quite admirable."

She shakes her shoulder free from Blueheart's grip and stalks calmly to the doorway. She turns as she reaches it. "Good luck," she says.

Blueheart leans towards Alton, who is still with her. "Make sure she leaves", she says, still angry.

But when she turns back to me her face is a little calmer. She looks at me with an amused expression. "She's wrong," she says to me, coldly. "I don't hope any more. You will be no more use than any of the others. But I will, at least, enjoy you."

I have a thousand questions I would ask if I was able to speak. But all I can do is make a soft noise into the gag. Blueheart takes me by the elbow and raises me from the chair.

The shoes pinch my toes again, but it is a pleasant relief, all the same, to be free of the cruel way the gown's boning pinches my waist.

Blueheart leads me to the centre of the room.

"It is time," she announces, "to take my new wife to bed."

The maids and Alton applaud politely as Blueheart leads me to the door.

In the entrance hall, Blueheart picks up a candlestick and guides me on, up the stairs.

We go to a different room, further down the gloomy hallway. Another bedroom, bigger than the one where I was dressed.

This room is quite dark. Blueheart sets the candlestick down on a table beside a large four-poster bed. The fire in this room is burning high, but it doesn't provide much more light. The corners of the room are all dark shadows, the ceiling vanishes into blackness.

Blueheart turns square to me, facing me, her hands on my waist, the bed behind me.

She slides her hands up my body, over my arms and my shoulder and behind my head. Her fingers twist at the strap of the gag and she unfastens it. I splutter with relief as the leather pad falls from my mouth and the gag drops onto the floor.

I take a couple of big breaths. Blueheart touches my bottom lip. "A shame to remove it really," she says in a low teasing voice. "I enjoyed you in that. You are more enchanting when you are silent."

"So, if I don't question you?" I say. "Is that what you like?"

Blueheart grins and covers my mouth with her hand. "Understand, wife, you should never question me. We are wed. You are my wife now and I am

your Mistress. Too much from this." She pulls back her hand and touches my bottom lip again. And you will wear that gag morning, noon and night. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I say, my voice slightly distorted by her finger on my mouth. "Yes, My Lady." Wondering if this is a real threat or just something she is saying to amuse herself. But the thought of being gagged, whenever the whim takes Blueheart, makes me feel twisted up and desperate deep inside, right at my core.

"Good, now, let me show you what good behaviour can earn you."

Blueheart turns me around and I hear the metal click of a lock. The manacles fall from my wrists. As I bring my hands to the front of my body, Blueheart turns me around to face her. Still holding my waist, she leans close and kisses me, soft lips on mine, teasing and warm. The kiss deepens as her tongue slides into my mouth. I gasp at the feel of it. My body seems to bristle with energy. Blueheart's hands slip all over me, stroking the fabric of my wedding gown. I feel good. I sigh with pleasure. Despite everything, I want her.

Blueheart coos with delight to feel me respond, pulling back from the kiss and starts to unfasten the buttons at the front of the gown. My tits spill out, pale and pink. I sigh again as Blueheart strokes them and then, as she dips her head to kiss my tight nipples. For some moments I am lost. I gasp with the pleasurable sensations of her tongue on my flesh, but, quite suddenly, my emotions flip. I remember where I am, who this is.

*Blueheart.*

Blueheart, who murders her wives. Who forced me to wed her bound and gagged. I try to step back but the bed is right behind me. I have to get away from her. No matter the pleasure of her wedding bed, being her wife is death. I cannot loose control. "Please," I say. "Please, stop."

Blueheart laughs against my skin and lifts her head. She looks at me with dark eyes. "Oh, no, I won't be stopping, dear wife. It is our wedding night. Besides," she reaches down and draws up my skirt until her hand is cupping my bare cunny. "You don't want me to stop. Your cunny is slick and greedy for me." She presses a finger against the seam of my body, slipping into the wet heat there. I gasp. With her other hand, Blueheart takes hold of my chin.

"Please," I say in a soft whimper. She's not wrong. My body does not lie.

Blueheart smiles. She brings her finger from between my legs and wipes the wetness onto my lips. The taste of myself is intoxicating. My head spins with desire. “Deny it all you wish, wife,” Blueheart whispers. “But your body tells me the truth of your heart.”

“You had me lashed,” I say, my voice hard-edged. “You held the lash yourself.”

“That was the law of Dulcia,” says Blueheart. “But thank you for reminding me.”

She turns me around and pushes me down on the bed. Face first. Her hands are on the tight laces at the back of the gown. I try to push up off the bed. But she holds me firm, pressing my face into the mattress. The sheets smell good. They smell like her. Before I can struggle again, she climbs on top of me, straddling my thighs as she opens the back of the gown completely, baring my back and ass.

“Ah,” says Blueheart, running her hand over the pattern of welts on my ass. She leans down and kisses one of them. I hiss in pain and Blueheart coos, “Delicious.” She kisses and licks my ass again and again while I whimper, murmuring, “I love to see the marks I have left on your body. Showing me how you belong to me.”

“Please,” I moan, but I don’t know what I want. Do I want her to stop or do more? My cunny is burning with desire, heat so high I can’t think.

Blueheart pulls my gown away completely and flips me over. I’m only wearing my lace stockings and shoes.

She touches the red marks left on my body from the gown’s tight corset.

Her eyes shine and she breathes. “These marks too, are beautiful.”

Her hand moves to cup my tits. I’m panting with desire but I still find it in me to say. “The wedding gown was too small. The boning was too tight.”

Blueheart lifts her head from my chest. “No. It was perfect. My wife should be tightly restrained. Especially a wild one like you.” She drops a kiss on my bare breast. “Reminding you of your place.” Another kiss. “That you belong to me. That your body belongs to me.” She dips her head again and this time she nips me with her teeth.

I yelp and then watch as Blueheart kisses her way down the centre of my body. When she reaches my cunny, she lifts her head and strokes over it lightly with the back of her hand. Just one light touch. “Oh, I have not forgotten your needy centre, my love. I will get to it. But first, let me adorn you.”

Blueheart guides me to move so I'm lying in the centre of the bed with my head on the pillows. She climbs on top of me and removes her frock coat. Still fully dressed otherwise, in her shirt and cravat and breeches. Everything but her high boots is white. She takes hold of my wrists and spreads my arms, placing them down above my head.

Then, as she leans over me, I hear a rattle of chains.

I twist to look and by the time I have managed it, Blueheart already has my right wrist in a metal cuff, attached to the bed with a short length of chain.

"No, please," I say, my heart sinking at the idea I will be bound again. *Chained in Blueheart's bed.* Is this how she kills? Will she tie me down and slit m throat on our wedding night?

"Shush wife. You need this. You're a runaway, remember. You hid from me. Let me take you this way so you can forget about trying to hide from me and give yourself over to pleasure." She fastens my other wrist in place. I do little to stop her. "I will make you feel such pleasure, dear wife. I can tell you are no maid. But that matters not. For when I make love to you the pleasure will be so intense you will feel certain that you did come to me an untouched virgin. All your other lovers will be tiresome memories."

I don't doubt that this is true.

Blueheart traces my inner arms with her tongue. She licks inside the crook of each elbow. I whimper with pleasure. "Ah yes" Blueheart coos, "so responsive."

She moves down to the other end of the bed and chains my stockinged ankles in the same fashion, cuffs tight and heavy on my body.

I am stretched out, bare apart from those fine lace stockings framing my cunny.

Blueheart lifts a small bottle from a table beside the bed. It's dark red.

"One final thing," she says, unstoppering the bottle and tipping out a droplet onto a fingertip. She places that dot of red oil on my lips. It tastes sweet and faintly of rose.

"What is that?" I say. "What did you give me?"

"It will enhance your pleasure."

As she speaks, I feel it. My body slowly starts to feel warmer. Deliciously. Desperately. I am burning. My skin is flushed. My blood sings and every inch of me screams to be touched.

I moan. Blueheart strokes my arm again and the feeling is so intense. I feel like her fingers are between my legs as they trace my skin. She stops and I buck in the chains, chasing the touch. “Oh no, no, please. Please touch me.”

Blueheart sits back. “Dark Rose Oil. It makes every touch a pleasure, but the lack of touch is pure agony.” She dances fingers over my throat. “It makes you so delightful. As eager for me as a starving whore.”

I whimper with pleasure. I know nothing but the touch of her fingertips, like they are lighting tiny fires under my skin.

She leans down and her lips touch mine. The kiss is exquisite. Instantly, as essential as breathing. I moan. It feels like a levitation. Lifting me off the bed. Higher and higher. I cry out when the kiss breaks. I writhe in the chains, begging for more in broken words.

But Blueheart gives me no more. She sits back and looks at me. Her eyes are dark with lust. I am laid out before her, my tits are high and proud on my body, vulnerable, shaking and presented to her by the way my arms are stretched taut above my head. She strokes a hand over one of them and sighs with pleasure as I keen for touch. “Oh now, this is quite wonderful. How delightful a sight you are like this, wife.”

I whimper and look at her beautiful lips. “Kiss me,” I sob out, unbidden. “Kiss me, please. Kiss me again.”

Smiling at me, Blueheart slips one finger into my mouth. I suck it. It feels good.

Blueheart dips her head and kisses my tits. One then the other, pulling my nipple into her mouth each time. Clamping it firmly between her teeth and flicking her tongue over it until I am moaning with pleasure around the finger in my mouth. And that pleasure builds and builds. I know this pleasure should be close to a climax. A release that tips me over, but that end never comes. The pleasure just keeps on climbing. I feel delirious.

Blueheart takes her finger back from my mouth with a soft pop and I moan at the loss. Stretched out, bound and helpless, I can do nothing except keen and whine as I lie before her and she kisses her way down my body. She kisses my thighs. She runs her tongue along the crease at the back of my knees, teasing and rubbing at the little crevice there with the intention and delight I would expect her to lavish on my cunny.

I beg for more. I beg for her mouth between my legs. My throat is aching from crying out and sobbing for more.

When she moves up my body towards my centre, her kisses have become nips and bites. Growing harsher and harsher. She growls with delight

I sob with need when her lips touch me between my legs. I try, straining against the manacles around my wrists to press down, to push myself more firmly onto her tongue as it flickers out with a teasing, ghostly softness.

Against my desperate flesh, she whispers, "You are so slick for me, wife. So delicious and ripe. Sweet as a split plum."

One of her fingers traces over me. I can feel the easy slip as she moves against me. I am so wet I feel like the liquid pouring from me is making a thick warm puddle between my legs.

Her tongue glides over me again, a little more pressure and I keen and thrash. I cannot resist her. I cannot maintain any pretence that I do not want this. The Dark Rose Oil has taken me, I am sure of it. Her wicked drug has made me into nothing more than a slave to my desire for Blueheart's fingers and tongue and body.

She laps at me. Her tongue feels exquisite, driving me higher and higher to peaks of pleasure I have never even imagined before. But still, I do not find release.

I beg to the bed canopy above me. "*Please, please, please.*" The pleasure so intense it is becoming a torture.

Blueheart makes a chuckling noise in her throat. "Sweet wife of mine," she coos and slides a finger into me, followed fast by a second. I feel so full and good. I want to open my entire body to her. My need for her inside me is like the greatest hunger I've ever felt. I want her to take me, use me, own me. Her fingers are big. The sensation of one of them entering me is like a storm breaking inside me. I can't hear or see. I'm all pleasure, nothing else exists but the rush of the Dark Rose Oil enhanced orgasm, a sensation so great, so good, I feel like it is binding me to Blueheart forever.

Some time later I blink up at Blueheart's face. She kisses me, her face wet from my desire.

Her voice is a sweet coo. "Good wife, exquisite wife. Now off you go." She reaches up and frees my wrists. I realise my ankles are already

unchained.

"What?" I say, bleary and lost. I can still feel pleasure rolling through my body.

"Go to your room," says Blueheart. "I need to sleep."

"I am not to sleep here?"

"No." Blueheart points to a door in a dark corner of the room. "You have our own chamber. Through there. Where you were dressed. Go along now wife."

Confused and still shaky, I get up from the bed on wobbly legs and totter across the room and through the door.

I find myself back in my own chamber. It feels like a long time since I was in here, being dressed and manacled for the wedding ceremony.

I look around. I barely had the chance before. The room is bigger than any bed chamber in Dulcia Hall, although sparsely furnished.

Along with the large bed, there's the small table beside the window, with the candelabra burning on it and a stout wooden chair beside it. There's another chair beside the fireplace where a dying fire glows a faint red.

There's a large wardrobe. I open the doors and look inside.

There are several very fine gowns of satin and lace, some heavy with embroidery and gems. All extremely expensive and rich. There are more heeled shoes and a pair of sturdy boots. There are two white cotton nightgowns. I take one and slide it over my naked, sensitised body. I've never worn a nightgown before.

On the table is a hairbrush and a looking glass. My reflection in it is wanton, my elaborate hairstyle has half come pinned in Blueheart's bed and is tangled in a sluttish mess. I have flushed cheeks and swollen lips. I have red bite marks on my neck and probably other places too.

There's some bread and honey and a cup of wine left out on the table. I am starving and my body feels like it is humming. I am grateful for a chance to eat and drink before I sleep. As the wine settles in my belly, I feel a great wave of exhaustion and a softness in my limbs.

I fall into bed and sleep.

I am Blueheart's wife.

Blueheart's ninth wife.

The eight before me have died.

8

# BLUEHEART'S WIFE

The next morning I am woken by a maid opening the curtains. I am warm in bed but the air in the room is cool. Weak sunlight pours in. It feels like winter, not early autumn. The weather up here on top of the mountains seems colder than down in the valley.

The maid turns around, but she doesn't speak. I don't expect her to. I have already grown used to the fact that Blueheart's maids are mute.

She gives me a nod and walks to my wardrobe to pull out a purple down, long, but low cut and embroidered in elegant swirling patterns with pale thread. I climb out of bed and look out of the window. I can see nothing but the forest from here.

I let the maid brush my hair and fix it up on top of my head, then dress me, a job I have done myself many times for the daughters of Duke Dulcia. The maid puts a corset on me before the gown, which is thankfully not as tight as the one that was built into my wedding gown. I am not used to being corseted daily, but I feel grateful that I will be able to sit and move with more comfort in this one.

Once the gown is in place, I almost expect the maid to also manacle my wrists, but she does not. She simply fetches a pair of dainty shoes, still heeled, but thankfully a better fit than my wedding shoes.

When I am shod, she signals for me to follow her and leads me out of the room into the dim passageways of the castle, down the stairs and to the dining room where I was taken after the wedding ceremony.

The room has barely been cleaned from the night before. There are still footprints in the grime on the flagstoned floor. The rug is crumpled. The table is littered with used wine glasses and the remains of the feast. Blueheart sits at the head of the table. She has her booted feet up on top of it, her big thighs encased in tight brown riding breeches. She wears a loose white shirt and her dark hair cascades down her back. She is eating chicken, tearing the flesh from a leg with her teeth as if she is starving.

"Ah," she says when I walk in, "my beautiful wife."

Just at the sight of her my cunny thumps. A sudden rush of heat as all of last night comes back to me fast. I want more. I want Blueheart to throw me over the table and make love to me again. Put her big fingers inside me. Put her whole fist inside me.

I realise I'm standing in the doorway with my lips parted, just staring at her.

"Come here, wife," Blueheart says and I meekly obey. Hoping she can't tell what I'm thinking. My brain feels cloudy with lewd thoughts.

When I get near enough, Blueheart pulls me onto her lap. I yelp in surprise, but Blueheart ignores this, nestling me into place. She strokes my face as she cradles me. "Did you sleep well, sweet wife?" she says.

"Very well. I was exhausted."

"I am sure you were. After your display in my bed last night. The whole castle heard you screaming for me."

I nod. This is probably true, but I feel ashamed to have it pointed out. The maid who brought me downstairs is still in the room.

"Eat now, wife. You must." She picks up a plate of bread, cheese and ripe plums and places it in front of me. Despite my late-night snack of bread and honey, I am hungry again. Blueheart picks up a plum and holds it to my lips. I bite into it. Sweet juice floods my mouth.

Blueheat chuckles happily and wipes a small drip of juice from my bottom lip with her thumb. She wears a gold ring on that thumb. I hadn't noticed it before. My mind flashes hot with the thought of her putting that thumb inside me. Of the feel of that ridge of metal moving against my core. Blueheart moves her mouth to my ear and coos, "You are so beautiful, wife. You wear this gown well, but I found you more alluring naked in chains. If only it were practical to keep you chained up all the time so you were utterly dependent on me." I shiver as she turns the plum so I can take

another bite, while her free hand slides over my knees and up, under my skirt, across the sensitive skin of my thigh.

I lean forward and take another bite of the plum, squirming as Bluehearts fingers graze over my cunny. She makes a soft sound of pleasure. “What a delightful wife I have found. Perhaps she was right about you. Perhaps you will be the obedient wife to save me from myself.”

I’d forgotten about her. The woman from last night. “You mean the woman at the wedding? Who was she?”

“No one. Someone who is forbidden from setting foot in this castle. The castle and grounds are warded, but she often finds a way to get in. She likes to spy on me.”

“Why?”

Bluehearts fingers tease me again. “No, no, we will not talk of that. Not when it is the morning after our wedding and you are panting in my lap, wife.”

I turn my head and look into her dark eyes. My mind is still clouded and heavy with thoughts of last night and does not want to be drawn onto other topics. I think of the sensations Blueheart created in my body. I want them again. I tilt my face towards hers and accept a kiss.

Her lips meet mine. Warm and delicious. I squirm against her fingers between my legs. She breaks the kiss before I’ve taken enough and whispers. “I knew you would respond well to that Dark Rose Oil. It makes a good wife of even the most troublesome woman.”

*And the spell… breaks.*

I remember. I know what this is. Why I feel this way? She drugged me.

I felt those intense things last night because she forced sex drugs on me.

“That wasn’t real,” I spit back at her. I slide off her lap. I brush my skirts down and glare at her. I put my fists on my hips. “You made me feel those things with that filthy oil. That wasn’t real.”

“Oh, it was, dear wife,” Blueheart looks amused. “Dark Rose Oil simply releases the real you. Stops you holding back.”

“That was not me. That was your drug. You used it to force me to desire you.”

“You do desire me.”

“I do not,” I spit back at her. It’s a lie, I know, but my anger growing. I want to hurt her. I want to show her she is a monster. “You took me. You had me lashed. You brought me here in chains. You made me attend my

own wedding bound and gagged. If I desired you, you wouldn't have had to do that. But you did. You did that to hide the truth."

"And what truth is that, wife?"

"You revolt me. You're a monster and you revolt me."

Blueheart makes a barking laugh and stands up and grabs me by the waist. She lifts me off my feet and throws me down on the breakfast table on my back. Plates clatter around me and I gasp, winded by how hard she slammed me down.

She climbs up on the table and straddles me, taking my wrists in her hands and pinning them down above my head. She looks furious. Her face, set with anger, looks truly monstrous. *Her true self.* "How dare you speak to me in such tones, you wretched harridan."

I roll my head on the wooden tabletop. "It's the truth."

"You are my wife, you ungrateful bitch, and I will take you however I choose. I will give you whatever elixirs I choose." She stares down at me. We're both panting. A traitorous part of me wants her to kiss me. Still burns for it. But I would never say so.

Blueheart says, "It's time I explained the rules around here, wife. Rules I expect you to obey. You will do as I say, obediently and without complaint. You will dress as I tell you and wear your hair pinned up elegantly. When I tell you to leave me alone, you will leave me alone. When I am home, you will share my bed each night until I give you leave to return to your own room. You may wander freely in this house when I do not command you to attend me, but you will not go to the top of the High Tower. And the final rule. I'm not your lover, I'm your Mistress. I own you and you will obey my every command. Understand?"

I'm panting under her. The feel of the weight of her body on mine is filling me with treacherous ardour. "And what if I don't? Will you murder me?"

Blueheart glares at me. I feel like that statement has truly wounded her, but she doesn't reply. She simply stands up, leaving me spread on the table.

My heart is beating so hard that I feel like she might be able to hear it.

"Now you can fuck off and entertain yourself for the day. I have work to do."

"Good." I get up from the table and try my best to walk from the room with dignity.

~

I go back to my bedroom. The fire has been lit and the room is pleasantly warm. After everything that's happened, I'm exhausted despite it being the start of the day. I lie down on my bed and after a short while, I fall asleep.

When I wake it feels dim in the room. I go to the window and see that the sun is already low in the sky, sky that is turning pink and purple. I don't know what time it is. When I think back, I don't think I've seen a clock anywhere in Blueheart Castle.

My mind feels clearer. I know what I should do. I must find a way out of the castle. I need to escape before I die like every other wife.

I get up and look through my wardrobe until I find a cloak. It's thick black velvet, lined with blue silk, with a heavy fur collar. I don't think I have ever seen a cloak so fine. When I put it on, the hem trails on the floor. I leave the room and go down the stairs.

I find my way to the back of the castle and a door that leads out into the grounds. Unlike the door at the front, it is unlocked. Perhaps I can find a way back to the path through the forest and escape to Dulcia. I should at least try. While I still have the will to do it. There's no one around. I step outside into the dusk. It's cold. The air scented with autumn. I walk down the gravelled path from the castle and into the gardens.

The gardens are overgrown, ill-kept like the rest of the castle. I saw no groundskeepers at the wedding. Gardens this size would need several staff to be kept finely. Why doesn't Blueheart have more servants? She is clearly far more wealthy than Duke Dulcia and her home is vast compared to Dulcia Hall, but she seems to have only a handful of maids.

The overgrown gardens still have a beauty to them. There are ornate stone balustrades along the path. Rose bushes trail over them. Lavender and jasmine scents the air. All around the edges of the gardens are high walls and beyond them the trees of the forest crowd in, dark and sinister.

Somewhere, out in the dark, a wolf howls.

The wolf makes me think of Blueheart. Her smile. The way she stares at me full of hunger.

*Will she kill me?*

Eventually the path I am on reaches a high stone wall. It turns to run alongside it. A short way along there is an ornate iron gate, chained and

padlocked shut. Are the gardens completely enclosed? Is there no way through to the forest? I look around.

"Good evening wife, what are you doing out here in the grounds?" I spin to find Blueheart standing behind me on the path. She wears nothing over her shirt sleeves to protect her from the cool of the evening. The moon is up although there is still some light in the sky. Silver glitters on her dark hair and white teeth.

"Taking the air," I say.

"The grounds are walled and the gate locked to protect us from the things that live in the forest. You will find no way out here."

"I was not searching for one," I say, sure my lie is obvious.

But Blueheart does not challenge me further. She leans in, cups my face in both hands and kisses me. The kiss is deep and sweet and I hunger for it. When she pulls back I'm a mess, slack-jawed. "It is almost time for supper, dear wife," she says in a low tone. "Come with me. We will eat and drink and then I will take you to bed and pleasure you to such peaks you are begging for my mouth on your cunny."

At that, I moan softly. I feel like my legs would not hold me if she did not have her hands on my face.

"Will you drug me again?"

Blueheart smiles. "If you can be sweet for me without Dark Rose Oil I will have no need."

"Please, I want to know what it is like to lie with you without it."

Blueheart laughs. She takes my arm and escorts me back to the castle and into the dining room, which is lit with dancing candles. At the windows, the curtains are still open. Outside it grows dark, the silver mauve twilight fading into blue-black while Blueheart and I eat a rich venison stew served by the silent maids. The meat is tender and the sauce is rich.

I am hungry for it

"You have a good cook," I say.

"No cook," Blueheart replies. "Alton takes care of it."

"Alton cooks? But Alton is your butler."

"Butler, cook, housekeeper. Alton takes care of those things."

I'm not sure what to say to that. It seems pointless to tell Blueheart that this is unusual or ask why she doesn't have a full complement of household servants.

Besides there are other things I am more curious about.

“Why don’t your maids speak?” I ask.

Blueheart looks at me. Her eyes flash in the candlelight. “I tore out their tongues,” she says and when I gasp at that, she laughs.

I feel my cheeks flush pink. “Are you teasing me?”

Blueheart raises one dark eyebrow. “Don’t ask too many questions, wife, or I will silence you too.” She lifts up an object and shows it to me. It takes me a moment to realise what it is. A leather strap with a bulky pad in the centre. I realise it is the gag I wore for our wedding. I don’t know where Blueheart has just produced this device from. She seems to have had it on her person.

I definitely don’t want that gag again so I keep quiet and resume eating.

A few moments later, Blueheart pushes her chair back with a squeal as it scrapes over the flagstoned floor.

“Enough, wife. Let us to bed.”

She takes me by the wrist. I get up and allow myself to be led up the stairs and back to Blueheart’s bedroom. My body starts to hum with anticipation. I realise I’ve been waiting all day for this moment.

Despite what my mind might feel about Blueheart, my body feels entirely different. My body is as eager for her as a dry cracked summer riverbed is for the rain.

I am on her bed, on my back before I know it and she is on top of me, kissing me, pulling off my fine clothes without a care for them. I am sure I hear a ripping sound more than once. A moment later I’m naked and Blueheart is kissing my body, working her way down, leaving marks on my shaking skin.

Her hand presses between my legs, forcing them wide apart so she can stroke over my centre. She purrs with delight as touching me there causes me to moan with pleasure and want. She lifts her head from my quivering belly and says, “Already so wet for me, good wife.”

I pull myself up on one arm and look down at her. “Are you going to chain me to your bed?”

Blueheart smiles wolfishly. “A sweet sight, but tonight, no, you do not need it.” She slips one finger right inside me. “You are already too desperate to resist me. You want more of what I gave you on our wedding night.” She slides her finger in and out, fucking me gently.

A strange unpleasant feeling twists in my belly. Shame. What Blueheart is saying is true. And I hate that it is. “I was drugged,” I say. “I was forced.”

“And that only added to your pleasure, wife. You remember how it felt. You crave the pleasure of my touch.”

I look sullenly at her.

She slips her finger out of me and gives the skin of my inner thigh a hard pinch.

I yelp in surprise.

“Say it.”

“Say what?”

Blueheart pinches me again, harder. It hurts but I feel my cunny flood with warmth. “Say that you crave the pleasure of my touch. Admit the truth of your filthy heart, wife.”

I swallow. “You want me to say I like this. That I want you to touch me?”

“Oh, I do. Because it’s true. And if you want my fingers to tease you greedy little cunny again, you will ask for it.”

I swallow. I do want Blueheart to touch me again. I want it more than anything. My mind feels clouded with desire. “Please,” I say, my voice cracking over the word.

Blueheart seems to enjoy this. She strokes my thigh. “You can do better than that,” she says. Her fingers skate down to my cunny, but instead of caressing me where I crave her, she pulls back and smiles, waiting.

“Please touch me,” I say. I stop and bite my lip. “Please fuck me.”

Blueheart grins. She shows her teeth. “Such a wanton wife,” she coos. Her finger slides into me. In and out. My whole body seems to ignite with pleasure. I lie back and spread my legs wider. “Please,” I say, shakily. “Please kiss me there. Please, My Lady.”

And that elicits a throaty sound from Blueheart as she gives me what I am begging her for, dipping her head and pressing her mouth to my cunny, flickering her tongue over my pleasure centre as she keeps working her fingers inside me.

I have pleasured myself with my own fingers many times. I have pressed my fingers inside myself and I know there is a spot just above my entrance that if teased can create a great explosion of joy, but this combination of feelings is more intense than anything I’ve ever felt, either alone or with another bed partner. I had thought the overwhelming wildness of our wedding night was down to the Dark Rose Oil Blueheart gave me, but it seems that there is more to it than that. Because the intense pleasure

of Blueheart's bed is down to her. Her touch, her voice, the way she treats me.

I've never felt such pleasure as I feel in Blueheart's bed.

She twists her fingers inside me as she sucks hard at the spot that makes me feel the most intense sensation. I arch on the bed, crying out. She does it again and then twice more and I break. I give in to it all.

My world explodes with intense joy as Blueheart lifts her face and growls, "You are mine, wife. Never forget it. Only I can give you this."

And she's right.

My body is still shaking as smaller peaks of pleasure rattle through me when Blueheart pulls me close to her. She is still clothed and as she holds me, I can feel her silk shirt against my heated skin. She whispers, "Do not fear. I will chain you again, wife. I will do so many things to you. I will spank you and gag you and put my whole hand inside you. I will show you pleasures you cannot imagine."

"Please," I moan, craving all of it. Any filthy thing she can suggest.

"In time. All things in time. We have our whole lives."

"How long will that be? How long will you let me live?" I say, not really thinking about my words.

"Shush," says Blueheart. She kisses me on the head. "We will have time enough. I will even whip you again. Yes. I will whip you again, my beautiful wife. When you deserve it."

"How would I ever deserve it?"

"I will whip you for disobedience, you can be certain. When you break my rules. They all do, in the end."

9

# THE FIRST TASK

Once more, Blueheart sends me from her bed to sleep in my own room when she is done with me. I am woken again by the maid and when I go down to breakfast, Blueheart taps her lap and I obediently walk over to eat my breakfasts perched on her leather-covered thighs.

I'm wearing a green dress today. As we finish eating Blueheart strokes the fabric." I like this one."

"It doesn't fit me," I say. "The clothes you have given me are all made for someone else."

"Indeed," Blueheart says. "They are the clothes I bought for my first wife. I don't see why I should buy more."

"Because you don't plan to keep any of your wives around for long?"

Blueheart laughs, "Because, wife, if I had my way, I would keep you naked. Naked and chained." She strokes my thigh clearly enjoying the thought. "And silent. The perfect wife."

"And what would I do while you were working if I were naked and chained? Just sit there?"

"Yes. At my feet."

"I'd get bored."

Blueheart looks thoughtful. "That is a concern. Actually, wife, I think you are already growing bored. That's why you have time to concern yourself about such trivial matters as the fit of your clothing. You are not used to a life of leisure. You miss your industrious life as a maid."

I look at her. “I assure you, I do not. That life was nothing but drudgery.”

But Blueheart ignores this, she stands up, tipping me off her lap. I only just manage to land on my feet and not in a heap on the floor. “Come with me,” she says, grabbing my wrist. “I know just the thing to keep you occupied.”

Blueheart leads me out into the castle’s entranceway. Like every other room in the castle, it’s cobwebbed and dusty. The floor still marked the footprints from our wedding, when the maids brought all kinds of mud and dirt from the chapel path in on their shoes. Blueheart says, “Clean this place up.”

“Clean it?” I look around. “It looks like it hasn’t been cleaned in months, years even.”

“It does, doesn’t it? And you are the Lady of this castle. You are responsible for housekeeping. Clean it. Do your job.”

I put my hands on my hips. “If keeping your house is my job then I should instruct the maids. If I am the Lady of this castle, I should not be its scullery maid.”

“The maids are lazy. They have grown too used to having no one instructing them. They have forgotten how to clean, I think you should set an example by cleaning this room yourself.”

“No one has instructed them? What about Peronel?” I remember Duke Dulcia’s eldest daughter. She never had any trouble instructing the servants.

“Peronel died less than a month after our wedding,” Blueheart says. “It was very fast, with her. I made a mistake with that choice. I hope you will be better.”

I shiver. “She only lived with you a month?”

Blueheart nods. She looks genuinely remorseful. “I kept that news from Duke Dulcia and his family. She died of an illness as I told them, but I made them think she had lasted a little longer. She wanted to live as a fine lady so intensely. I let them think she had been able to.”

“And all your other wives? Did they all get this same illness?”

Blueheart’s face turns hard. “I do not have to give you a full account of all my marriages to you. You will clean the castle entrance and stairway today, I will inspect your work at sunset. You will suffer if I am not satisfied.” She turns away.

“I am no housemaid,” I say to her back. “I am your wife.”

Blueheart turns back. She steps closer and puts a hand on my face. “You,” she says, “are not a maid in any sense.” Her thumb strokes over my cheek. “You need a reminder of how high you’ve climbed in a handful of days. You are my wife and I will treat you as a maid if I wish.”

“And if I don’t do it? If I refuse to clean this room.”

“I told you what would happen if you disobeyed me. You are my wife and you will obey me. If you don’t complete this task to a high standard by sunset, I will whip you raw.”

And with that, she pulls back her hand, turns and she sweeps off to a corridor at the back of the entrance hall.

I look around at the task I’ve been given.

There is a lot of work to be done to clean this hallway to a decent standard, but not work I am not used to. If Blueheart assumes I will fail this task and she will get to whip me, I decide, then she is wrong.

Behind the large sweeping staircase is a door and when I open it, I find another flight of steps leading down. I am sure this will be the way to the kitchens. I walk down them and find myself in a whitewashed passageway. I follow it a short distance and end up in a wide kitchen. The floor is stone and the walls are red brickwork. There are sideboards and dressers all along the walls full of copper pans and crockery. The room smells of smoke and meat. There is one maid there and Alton, who is kneading some dough for bread on a large table in the centre of the room. The maid is idly poking at a range against the back wall.

I announce to them both, “This castle is filthy. I am going to set an example of the standard I expect by cleaning the entrance hall and staircase.”

They both look at me, bemused.

“So I need some water,” I say.

Alton shrugs and points to a large sink in a corner by the door. I walk over and find two buckets underneath it. I fill them and, after some more searching around the kitchen and the smaller rooms leading off it, also collect a broom, a scrubbing brush, some rags and a bar of hard soap.

I lug two full buckets of water back to the entrance hall and begin.

As soon as I start, I realise I should have changed my clothes. I have done this type of work many times but never whilst wearing a rich heavy gown and a corset. But there I will not let this hinder me. I kick off my shoes and continue.

But I know what I am doing. I have been doing this kind of work all my life. I sweep and I scrub. I take up the rugs and hang them up in the yard at the back of the castle ready for beating. I clean the tiled floor underneath them. The floor is filthy. I end up scrubbing and scrubbing and having to fetch more water three times. But, eventually, I reveal a beautiful pattern of finely carved stone on the floor.

When my body is aching and my stomach rumbling I return to the kitchen and Alton gives me some bread. I complain about the amount of rubbish and debris I have accumulated. Broken furniture, rugs too stained to be saved and other miscellaneous objects. Alton suggests a bonfire in the grounds behind the castle and gives me a tinderbox.

I build a huge pile of debris and burn it. I sigh as I inhale the smoke.

I wipe my filthy hands over my face and look down at myself.

I am a state. My gown is ruined.

"You have been working hard, wife." Blueheart seems, once again, to have appeared out of nowhere.

"Yes," I say as she wraps her arms around my waist and pulls me to her. "I have."

"Then let us inspect your labours." Blueheart takes me by the hand and leads me back through the castle doorway.

She stops as soon as she has crossed the threshold and sees the entranceway in all its newly cleaned and swept glory. Then looks at me beaming happily. "You have worked hard. Wife, I am impressed." She drops my hand and walks around. Her boots click on the newly scrubbed flagstones. She touches the shining bannisters and inspects the wood panelling that is now free from dust. "Very good, wife," she says. "Very good. I don't think I have ever seen this entrance hall look so well kept in a decade."

"Thank you," I say, swelling a little at the praise.

Blueheart walks back over, takes me in her arms and kisses me deeply, seeming not to care how filthy dirty I am. I'm panting when she murmurs. "But now the rest of the castle looks even more dingy in comparison. Do the dining room too."

I startle, pulling back to look up at her. "Now?"

Blueheart nods. "Yes. Now."

"But it's already late afternoon. The light will fade soon."

Blueheart chuckles as she nuzzles my neck. "Then you'd better get on."

I pull away and look her in the eye. “The dining room,” I say, jutting out my chin. “Fine.”

Blueheart leaves me to my new task and I begin. I clear out the dining room, taking used dishes and glasses all down to the kitchen and stacking them by the sink. I don’t have time to wash all of this myself so I order Alton to instruct one of the maids to do it.

I go back upstairs. I take the filthy linen cloth from the table and throw it on the bonfire. I beat the rugs and wash windows. I dust everything. Returning to the kitchen, where I discover one of the silent maids is washing all the dishes, I find a cake of beeswax and take it upstairs to polish the table.

By the time I am done, it is dark outside. I spread a clean cloth on the table and light the candles. At dinner with Blueheart I have only seen this room lit by a handful of candles, but using a spill from my bonfire I light them all. Both the newly polished candelabras on the table. All the wall sconces and the candles on the mantle.

The room sparkles. The rich wall hangings, beaten of dust, are vivid with colour, red, black and gold. The walls are washed, the floor is clean, the newly polished furniture gleams softly. The room smells fresh. The cake of soap I took from the kitchen this morning is nothing but a small nub.

In contrast, I am even more filthy, dirty and damp and sooty from the bonfire. My body aches so much I could fall to the floor and sleep there. But I feel good. I have done good work. I am proud to show it to Blueheart. I want her to be pleased with me.

And my work will reward me too. I spend time in these rooms. And my time will be much more pleasantly spent now these spaces are no longer dusty and stale.

“Beautiful,” says Blueheart from the doorway behind me as I stand admiring my work. I turn. My heart leaps. She looks beautiful too. She is dressed all in black, a black frock coat and black leather breeches. At her throat is a froth of black lace.

I turn and smile at her. “I would have washed the curtains but there would not have been time to dry them. Perhaps when spring comes”.

“Perhaps,” says Blueheart. “Good work, wife. I am glad to see you can obey me after all.”

“Are you disappointed you don’t get to whip me?” I say, playfully.

Blueheart grabs me and pulls me into a kiss. When she's done, she says, "Are you?"

It's strange. It's only been a few days since that lashing, but the welts haven't troubled me since the wedding night. I wonder if that is down to the castle, somehow. I bite my lip. "It was a cruel punishment, My Lady."

"I am sure you will earn it again before I break you, you are so headstrong. You should not be so defiant." She kisses me again. "So beautifully defiant. And filthy. I have had the maids draw a bath in your room. Go and make yourself delightful for me."

I nod. I go up to my room and find a tub of steaming scented water set before the fire, which roars high, more well-stoked than I have ever seen it. I am thrilled at the sight of this bath. A luxury beyond my dreams only days ago. I strip and climb into the hot water. It is exquisite. Warm and soothing on my aching muscles. In a gold dish, there is some sweet soap that smells of violets. I wash my body and my hair. After I am clean and my skin is pink and shiny from the heat, I lie back and soak. I stay there until the water is too cool to enjoy. Then I climb out and wrap my body in the soft linens that have been left piled on a chair for me.

I am so exhausted. I settle myself down on the fireside chair and almost fall asleep, only roused when a maid appears to help me dress. I choose one of the tighter of my corsets. And a bright red gown with a full wide skirt. The yards and yards of red silk that have gone into it are breathtaking.

It must be late, but in the dining room, Blueheart waits for me at the table in her black outfit. Her dark hair is loose down her back. She looks so handsome as she quirks a smile at me. "My wife."

As soon as I am close enough, she hauls me into her lap. "I have been thinking," she says, "about what a shame it is I didn't get to whip you for disobedience."

"I am sorry, My Lady," I say, a little breathless at the thought.

"Perhaps instead…" Blueheart says and grabs my waist, she turns me over as if I am nothing but a ragdoll. I yelp as I end up face down over her lap, my tight corset pinching my waist.

"Please, what are you doing?"

In reply, Blueheart lifts my skirts up, revealing my naked ass and strokes it.

I gasp. "No. Stop." Surely even Blueheart would not spank me over her lap like a child, in the middle of the dining room? But as soon as I think that

I realise that of course she would. My face burns with the shame of it as I have a second realisation, the idea of it is making my cunny burn with need.

"Shush, wife," Blueheart coos sweetly. "You deserve a reward."

"Then give me one," I say, my voice heavy with a desire that is quickly overriding my shame.

Blueheart laughs and spanks her hand down on my ass.

It's harder than I could have imagined such a stroke could be. Blueheart's hand feels as intense as the strap the cook used to use in Dulcia Hall.

I'd do anything to avoid a dose of that strap.

But this…

Blueheart spanks me again.

I look down at the rug. A rug I cleaned hours ago. And in a sudden rush of horror, I remember where we are. "No," I say, squirming. "Not here. The maids could walk in at any moment."

But I'm not sure I mean it.

Blueheart laughs. "They all know what you are, wife," she says as she spanks me again.

"And they also know," Blueheart continues between hard blows. "That you are my wife and my property and I can do whatever I wish to you."

She keeps on spanking me hard until I am crying out from each blow. Sobbing and moaning, The painful heat grows and changes, becoming a distinctly pleasurable sensation. Soon I am squirming differently, not trying to escape her lap, but to rut against it.

Blueheart chuckles. She stops spanking me and strokes my heated skin. "How beautiful you look with your ass as red as your fine gown."

"You are a sadist," I sob, still looking down at the floor.

"Oh, I am, my sweet, I crave it. Your pain is delicious to me." She grabs my waist again, lifting me off her lap and setting me on my feet. I rub my stinging ass with both hands. Blueheart looks at me, smirking. "I will allow you to eat your dinner standing up as I am sure your ass is tender."

She rings a bell on the table and Alton appears with a large soup tureen. She ladles soup into two bowls. I stand in front of mine and begin to eat, sulky and conflicted.

"Do not sulk, wife," Blueheart says, tearing herself a piece of bread. "After we eat I will take you to bed and add some pleasure to that pain."

And she does.

Once again I find myself lying under Blueheart on her wide bed. As ever, Blueheart has not removed any of her clothes, while I am stripped bare, my skin revealed to her hungry gaze and greedy hands.

Blueheart strokes my body as she says, “What would like me to do to you, wife? You have been so obedient today. How would you have me take you?”

My first thought is that I would like Blueheart to strip too. I want to see her body. I know her shoulders and arms must be muscular and strong. I know her thighs are powerful. I want to know what she looks like unclothed.

But I know I should not ask for that. Somehow, I know, such a reward will be far harder earned.

I whisper, “Please, My Lady. Fuck me.”

“You want my fingers inside you?” Blueheart says.

I spread my legs and arch my back, eager for it. “Yes.”

Blueheart smiles. “How many.”

I think.

*Two?*

I say, “Three.”

Blueheart moves back. She climbs off my body and lies down beside me on the bed. She runs a flat palm down my belly and between my legs. One finger slides inside me. Easily. I’m still hopelessly slick from the spanking.

Slick enough that Blueheart coos with pleasure as she moves easily inside me saying, “That’s one.”

I moan and spread my legs wider. “More,” I say as I try to press down and get it deeper.

Blueheart slides another finger into me. “There’s two,” she says, fucking me slowly and so deep. Her fingers curl inside me, tormenting me with pleasure. I arch.

The stretch is intense. The pleasure builds.

But still, I open my body wider and say, “More.”

Blueheart presses a third finger into me with a soft squelch of wetness. I am leaking desire. I cry out at the feeling even before she starts fucking me faster and harder. Her lips find mine. Her tongue deep in my mouth as she thrusts hard into me.

It's so good. It's as good and as satisfying as any fuck I have ever had. And yet. I feel insatiable. I want more. I want more than anyone has ever given me. "Please," I moan, pulling my mouth away from the kiss. "Please, My Lady, more."

I open my eyes. Blueheart is gazing at me. "I know what you need, wife," she says as she slips a fourth finger into me. But she doesn't stop there. Before I can begin to get used to this new overwhelming feeling, Blueheart goes further. With a twist of her wrist, her thumb slips into me.

I gasp.

The feel of it.

The idea of it.

There is a moment of almost unbearable fullness and then, Blueheart's entire fist is inside me, moving gently, rocking from side to side.

"My Lady, I…" I say, not knowing what I want to say. What I want.

Blueheart's mouth is at my ear. "Come for me, wife. Come with my fist inside you." She bends her head down and licks at the apex of my sex. Everything is tight and my sensitive place there sparks with a jolt of sensation so wild it takes my breath. I scream as the pleasure rips through me, a wild peak as her fist rocks inside me. My entire body seems to snatch at her wrist, clenching like a trap…

In her arms, catching my breath, I press my naked body close to hers. "Can I sleep here?" I ask, too bone-weary and soft to move.

Blueheart chuckles. "Was ever a wife more fickle? No. Go and sleep in your own room."

I groan, but I obey. Exhausted and shaky, I climb from the bed naked. How I make it into my own room, I am not even sure.

10

# THE FIRST WIFE

I'm not sure if I'm awake or dreaming when I hear the voice. A soft, sing-song, calling to me. Saying, "Seri, Seri, do you even remember your name? You have only been gone a handful of days? Are you so drunk on pleasure already? Do you remember your old life in Dulcia? Do you remember who Lady Blueheart truly is?"

I open my eyes. The room is dark. Even the dying fire gives almost no light at all.

"Who's there?" I say, quietly.

My eyes adjust and I make out a figure, sitting on the end of my bed. A woman.

"Seri," she says in a thin whisper of a voice that I am not certain isn't in my own head. "Seri."

I try to make out the woman's features. Her face is pale. Her hair is dark. She wears a fine gown of yellow silk and satin. Her features blur and swim before they form a face. A sweet face, innocent and young.

"Who are you? How did I get in my room?"

"Because it's my room," says the woman. "I am the Lady of Blueheart Castle. This is my bedchamber."

I stare at the women. There's something eerie about her. I realise with a rush of shock that the reason she looks eerie is because she is not quite real. Her body is like mist. Through her chest, I can see the rest of my bedchamber. I can see the shape of the fire quite distinctly. "You're not real," I say.

“I am real enough, Seri. Almost twenty years ago, I was as real as you. I shared her bed. She called me wife.”

“You’re one of Blueheart’s wives? Did Blueheart kill you?”

“I’m the first. I’m her first wife.”

“Then you are dead.”

“Yes, Seri. I am dead. And you will be too, soon if you do not listen to me.”

She’s the first wife. She’s how it all began. “Please, what happened to you?”

“I was from Dulcia,” says the woman. “She always chooses her brides from Dulcia, because of me. Her first true love. I bring you an important message, Seri. You must leave this place. You must run. Run for your life.”

I shiver slips down my spine. “Run? Run how? There is no way out of this place, and even if there was, where would I go? Into that forest. I would surely die.”

“You will die if you stay here. She will kill you. You know she will. She killed us all. Seri, I cannot stay long. The dead cannot speak to the living except in the direst circumstances. And these circumstances are dire. You must listen to me, Seri. Please. You must leave this place. Being her wife is death.”

“I’m not leaving”, I say. “I don’t want to.” And I realise, as I say it, that I don’t want to leave. I want to stay here. I want to be Blueheart’s wife. Despite her mercurial moods and bouts of outright cruelty. I like it here. I am satisfied and I like her.

*I like her.*

The woman on the bed shakes her head sadly. “Have you really forgotten the danger you are in? A few nights of pleasure in Blueheart’s bed and you are willing to overlook what she’s done? What she did to me? What she will do to you too? You would pay that price for her pleasures?”

The figure on the bed starts to swim. “I am leaving now,” she says. “But you would do well to heed my words. If you remain here you will die. She will kill you. By the time she shows you her true self, it will be too late.”

The words fade away.

Blueheart’s first wife is gone, vanished into the dark.

I lie still in my bed. The room is totally silent other than the occasional hiss from the dying fire.

I wait for a while, wondering, first, if the woman will return, and then, whether I perhaps dreamed her.

I must have done.

After some time, I fall back to sleep.

When one of the maids wakes me the next morning, I am certain it was all a dream.

11

# PUNISHMENT YARD

I don't tell Blueheart about the ghost of her first wife in my room, certain she would tease me for being shaken by a dream, or perhaps even be angry that I had a dream about running away.

A few days pass. Little happens during daylight hours. I explore the castle, learning the layout of its many rooms. On the ground floor, along with the dining room is a dusty parlour full of very fine furnishings and a giant ballroom with a great chandelier in its centre that is almost hidden entirely by cobwebs.

Unbidden, I start work to clean and restore these rooms. When the silent maids see what I am doing, they begin helping me, and after a few days of that, I start to give them instructions.

There are four of them. Alton tells me their names. Ella, Daria, Gemma and Hanna. I learn which is which and which jobs each does better. Ella, with the dark shiny hair, is the tallest and I find a ladder so she can clean and polish the chandelier. With a team of maids, the work goes much faster. We take down curtains and wash them. We take rugs outside and beat them free of what seems to be years of dust. We wash windows and floors and polish furniture.

I retire each evening to Blueheart's bed and experience pleasure the like of which I have never known before.

Being Blueheart's wife is a wonder. In a few short weeks, I feel like I have forgotten my old life completely. I am a prisoner in this castle and I do

not mind at all. This life is so much sweeter than the one I had as a servant in Dulcia Hall.

I never dream of Blueheart's first wife again. I forget her and her warnings. A dream from an old life, a life forgotten.

One day, when I feel like I must have cleaned every room on the ground floor, I come upon a door halfway along a dark corridor towards the back of the castle. I think it must be another way out to the grounds. When I try the handle, the door is unlocked. It creaks open on unloved hinges and opens onto a small cobbled yard. There are low walls built around it and at the far end a stone archway leads into the grounds proper, but this space, it is clear what this is, this is a punishment yard.

Like the one in the centre of Dulcia Square, the place I was taken to be lashed, but this is a more elaborate version. Dedicated to correction and torment.

In the centre of the yard is a small wooden platform, on which stands a whipping post, a tall wooden structure with manacles dangling from the top. Next to that is a punishment pillory, similar to the one I was placed in, wooden, with holes for the neck and wrists. Another post holds a scold's bridle dangling from a chain, a metal head-shaped iron cage with an iron gag built into it. And against one of the yard's walls, away from the platform, is an iron cage the size of a coffin set on its end, the size to hold a standing prisoner.

I gasp at the sight of all this. Blueheart has threatened to whip me, but I did not think she would have something like this set up and ready. Who does Blueheart punish out here? Her staff? Or just her wives? Could any of her eight dead wives have died in this yard? Under her whip.

*Could all of them?*

Gingerly, I walk closer and shiver to see that on the wooden platform are a few distinct blood stains.

Strange feelings wash over me. Horror, certainly, but mixed with a kind of twisted desire. My cunny burns hot as I think of Blueheart with her whip, of how it would feel to be punished by her again, now, after I have experienced such pleasure in her bed. I think of how hard she spanked me. I wonder what kind of defiance would get me led out here, savagely whipped under her cruel lash.

I cry out as a jolt of pleasure rushes through me and I have to grasp hold of the whipping post to steady myself. It rolls through me and I am horrified

to find myself hot and sticky between my legs.

I run from the yard, back through the door and draw the bolt with shaking hands. My heart beats hard as I lean my back against the door, unsure what I just saw or what my intense reactions to it could have meant.

That evening, over dinner, Blueheart praises the changes I have made to the rooms on the ground floor. “This place needed the touch of a good wife,” she says over plates of roast beef.

“I’ll start on the upper floors tomorrow.”

“I will enjoy that. Do remember my rules. Do not attempt to go to the High Tower.”

I nod. “Of course, My Lady.” In truth, I had forgotten Blueheart’s rules and that particular directive about avoiding the High Tower.

Blueheart raises her wine glass. Her teeth glitter. “It will be delightful to have the place so cared for by my good wife.”

“Did your other wives not take care of the castle?”

Blueheart looks thoughtful. “I forget. I think perhaps, at first. Like you. But, no, not like you…” She pauses. “But. Ah, let us not talk of other wives. They are the past. You are my wife. The only wife I need.”

I nod I am surprised she even talked about her other wives for as long as she did. Blueheart normally dismisses any enquiry about her other wives without saying anything about them.

As Blueheart seems more willing than usual to explain things to me, I finish my food and say, “You still haven’t told me why your maids don’t speak.”

“It would make the place too noisy with their chatter. Although there is one who I allow a voice still, Meg, she is called.”

“I’ve never seen Meg.”

“She’s the scullery maid. She is not permitted to come above stairs. That's probably why she’s kept her voice.”

“Why can’t they speak? What do you do to them?”

“Oh, a harmless little piece of magic, painless and reversible. Did you really believe I ripped out their tongues?”

“Perhaps,” I say. “Once. And even if it is painless it is still cruel to force them to be mute.”

“Cruel,” Blueheart says thoughtfully. “Perhaps. I am cruel. I am a monster. You like me cruel, sweet wife.”

I don’t deny that. “But do they?”

Blueheart waves a hand in the air. “Oh, they are well fed and warm. And as you have seen they do not work hard. I think you should worry less about them and more about how you can serve me as a dutiful wife.” She raises one dark eyebrow as she leans close.

She kisses me and I forget everything else.

12

# THE UNSILENT MAID

The following day I go down to the kitchens interested to see if I can speak to Meg. The idea of having the chance to speak to someone who isn't Blueheart or the unsmiling Alton is appealing.

When I arrive in the large room, Alton is there, preparing vegetables. When I ask about Meg, she points me towards a small room off the kitchen.

I walk through a stone archway and find a slender, dark-eyed girl with her arms in the sink, washing pans. She looks up when I walk in. She looks surprised to see me.

She makes me think of Luna. Luna was a scullery maid. I'll likely never see Luna again. When was the last time I saw her? Scampering down the stairs to the kitchens that morning.

Does she miss me? I hope she misses me.

"Good morning," I say to the maid. "I'm Seri. Seri Blueheart." I pause. Is that my name? I suppose it is. I've never had any more of a name than Seri. "I am the Lady of Castle Blueheart."

Meg nods. "Aye, yes. I know that ma'am. The new wife."

I'm slightly taken aback to see that it's true. Meg can speak. How did it become strange to me for a maid to be able to speak?

"I just wanted to ask how you were. How do you find working here? Are your duties reasonable?"

Meg frowns. "Reasonable? No one has ever asked me that before. I suppose they are. I do as I am told. I mostly wash the pans and keep the kitchen clean. Oh, and I light the range and boil the water. I light the castle

fires in the morning. I serve the servants meals and clean up after them." She shrugs. And these are, indeed, perfectly normal scullery maid duties.

"Does Alton treat you fairly?"

"I suppose. She is cold. But I would not call her unfair."

"She is cold with me too."

"Probably because you were once a servant. She is like that with all servants."

"Oh," I am surprised at this. It had not occurred to me that Alton is so curt with me because she sees me as another servant. "You think that she thinks I am not good enough to be Blueheart's wife?"

Meg looks around, checking no one, and especially Alton is listening in on us. She must be satisfied because she says. "I know she does. I have heard her say those exact words. That you are no better than any other of us servants."

"I think that's true. I was surprised she chose me. I thought she would want a high-born lady."

"She has had enough of those, I expect."

Yes, I think, she has had eight of them. Perhaps Meg is right. Blueheart's last wife was Peronel. A more spoiled high-born lady than she could have found anywhere. Perhaps her experience with Peronel made her decide to try a different kind of wife. "Did you meet them? The others? Do you know what happened to them?"

"No. I never met any of them. I have only been here a year. The last wife of Lady Blueheart was already gone when I arrived. When I found out she'd had so many wives. I asked the same questions. There was another maid who spoke then. She told me that they all kill themselves. Throw themselves from the window of the High Tower. But that got her…" Meg tails off and touches her mouth.

"Made mute?"

"Yes. She can do that to anyone. She has magic. Blueheart. Although she doesn't use it much."

"Is she a witch?"

Meg shakes her head. "But I heard she made a deal with a witch to get her magic, so it is an evil power. She can take your voice. Or anything she wants. I heard she makes their tongues vanish. But they cannot speak after it is done so cannot tell me how it works. All I know is that once they anger her, they never speak again."

“She told me it was painless?”

Meg shrugs. “I don’t know. I have not seen it done.” She looks as if she wants to return to her work, but I am excited to be speaking to someone, someone like me. I want to ask more questions. I want to find out everything Meg knows. I say, “How did you end up working here?”

“I grew up in a home for foundlings. I went into service at a house in Mendel, that's one of the Blueheart lands, the other side of the mountains from Dulcia. Blueheart came to visit one day and she bought me.”

“I was a foundling too, I say. I was left in the forest outside Dulcia. That’s how I came to be in service too. Perhaps a rich lady will choose you as a wife one day and you will not have to wash pots.”

“I would not wish for your life, My Lady. I may have many duties daily, but I would not choose being Blueheart’s wife over it.”

“It was not a choice,” I say.

And this is true. I did not choose this. I did not want this. I was forced. If I had known then what I now know of the pleasures of this castle, would I have chosen it?

I was once so sure Blueheart killed her wives. Now, I feel like I have pushed that thought aside. Decided simply to ignore it. How could I have forgotten the danger I am in? The danger Blueheart’s first wife warned me of?

Meg smiles shyly. “No,” she says. “But it is good that you are here. She is easier, I think, with you here.

She is quite pretty. Meg. There is a small, but distinct spark in the air between us. She is no Blueheart, but in another world perhaps. If I met this maid in a tavern, I would have taken her back to my garret room in Dulcia Manor.

But I would never risk that now. I am not so stupid as to flirt with a maid under Blueheart’s roof. So I simply smile at her.

I’m about to leave and return to my duties when I see Meg’s expression change. She goes pale. Her mouth drops open a little. She seems frozen in terror.

I turn to follow her gaze. Knowing what she is looking at from her expression before I see for myself.

Blueheart stands in the stone scullery archway. Her expression wild with anger.

“How dare you,” she says in a quiet voice that is terrifying.

“Please,” I say quickly, “I was just asking Meg about her duties. As Lady of your castle.”

“You were not,” Blueheart says, continuing in her threatening, low tones. “You were discussing me. You were discussing me with my servants. You ask me why I prefer my maids to be mute, now you see. They cannot resist tattling about me. I will not allow such gossip about me under my own roof.”

She raises her hand. She’s not close enough to strike either of us. She is looking at Meg. And, it seems, Meg knows what this means.

She holds her hands up like a shield in front of her face and screams, “No, please. Please. She asked me. She—”

Her voice dies in her throat. Her mouth moves soundlessly. She grabs her own throat, stricken. She cannot speak another word.

“No,” I say, desperate. “She wasn’t doing anything. It wasn’t her fault.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Blueheart says, stepping forward and grabbing me. “Don’t worry, wife. I will punish you too.” With a tight grip on one of my arms, she drags me into the kitchen and throws me over the wide wooden table.

She picks up the skirts of my fine gown and tosses them over my back, baring my ass

“No,” I yelp out in horror, but she is holding me down with one big hand on the base of my spine.

Alton and two other maids are in the room, witnesses to my shame. Along with Meg who has walked through, staring at me, face full of anger at what I’ve done to her.

I squirm.

“You will learn to behave yourself, wife,” Blueheart snarls. “Alton, pass me that spoon.”

“I look over my shoulder and catch a glimpse of Alton handing Blueheart a large wooden spoon.” I swallow. My mouth is sour with fear.

“Thank you, Alton,” Blueheart says as she takes it. “Now, let this be a lesson to you in how I expect my wife to behave.”

She smacks the spoon down hard on my bare ass. I yell in pain as a vicious burning erupts across my flesh. “No, no please,” I scream, trying to struggle up off the table as Blueheart hits me again.

The burn is excruciating. Somehow this is worse than being lashed in the square. And it has none of the sweet pleasure of being spanked in

Blueheart's lap. I am being beaten on the bare ass like a child. With a spoon, in front of servants. The hard edge of the table digs into my thighs and my face burns with shame as Blueheart spanks my ass until I am sobbing from the pain and my ass feels like it is on fire.

Blueheart drops the spoon on the floor and drags me up with a tight grip on my upper arm. “And now,” she says, “I will give you some time to think about what you have done.”

I am taken in Blueheart’s rough grip, out of the kitchen through another room and out of a backdoor into the grounds.

It’s cold outside. I am not dressed in a cloak or any warm clothes, wind whips across the grounds. Beyond the high walls, the forest looms, a dark forbidding mass. For a moment I wonder if she is going to take me into the forest and leave me there for the wolves and bandits.

But we don’t go that way. Blueheart drags me around the side of the castle to an iron gate at the back of it. We pass through that gate, and we’re in the punishment yard.

“No,” I cry, fighting harder in her arms, but her grip just gets tighter.

“What shall it be, wife?” Blueheart says, turning me so I am forced to look at everything she has available to punish me. “Well? Would you care to choose your fate?”

Blueheart releases her grip and I fall to my knees in front of her. “Please. No more, please.” I’m sobbing, tears on my cheeks.”

“It’s too late for begging and tears, wife.” Blueheart says, “ You need a hard lesson. You are becoming far too wilful. And I think it’s clear what that lesson should be. Your tongue is the cause of all your troubles. And since I do not wish to use magic to make you mute, I will employ a more traditional method. Some of your fellow townsfolk back in Dulcia seemed to think you deserved a spell in a scold’s bridle. I think now would be the time.”

She hauls me up from the floor and drags me onto the platform. I am positioned underneath the scold’s bridle where it hangs for a wooden post on an iron chain. Blueheart opens it and forces my head inside it. My face is encased in iron bands. A further piece of iron, hard and cold is shoved between my lips, forcing my teeth apart. It tastes bitter and rusty. I make a sound of desperate protest as Blueheart clicks the lock at the back of my neck.

She steps back. I am held in place by the chain attaching the scold's bridle to the post. Although I am otherwise free, I can move my arms and legs, I cannot form any intelligible words. The iron piece in my mouth is painful, pressing my mouth and lips into a strange shape and causing me to drool like an animal.

I whimper. I can't do much else.

Blueheart moves closer again. She puts her arms around me and kisses me slowly on the metal piece covering my mouth, an action that makes me burn and squirm with frustration. "You look delightful like this, wife. I do so love to see you silenced. And though your tears are sweet, you should not cry, you will learn to behave eventually I am sure."

She gives me another kiss on the forehead and walks away. I cry out, making awful, humiliating noises into the bridle, but Blueheart ignores them, leaving me there. And there's nothing I can do about it.

It is cold in the square. And I have no idea how long I will be left like this.

I cannot sit or rest at all, only stand in place. I find a position that is somewhat comfortable, leaning against the post, but nevertheless, after a while, my legs start to ache.

Occasionally someone crosses the yard. Alton or, once or twice, one of the maids. They ignore me.

It's humiliating, being punished like this publicly, and in such a fashion. I almost feel like taking another flogging would be better.

When Blueheart finally returns, it's dark in the yard. I am contrite and desperate for release as she stamps up onto the platform. She removes the bridle and draws me, shivering, into her arms. The relief of having that piece of iron removed from my mouth is intense. I sag in her arms.

"There now, wife," Blueheart coos into my hair as she holds me, "perhaps you will behave for me."

I try to reply, but my mouth is too bruised and sore.

Blueheart takes me to my room where a hot bath is waiting, but I am not allowed to linger, letting the water's heat seep into my aching muscles, as I want to. Blueheart demands I come to her bed, not dressed, still wrapped in the linens I used to dry myself, where she warms me further with her furs and warm wine. "At least you do not stink the way you did when I took you from that wardrobe," she says, amused.

I pout and drink more wine. “That punishment was unfair and cruel,” I say to her. “You know I was doing nothing to insult you.”

Blueheart strokes my face. “Perhaps I did it because it arouses me to punish you, wife. I am your Mistress and your owner. Her hands stray down, over my body and between my legs. I can do with you as I please.”

I gasp. She is teasing my cunny with her fingers, but the statement is what has sent a bolt of desire through me

“Yes,” I breathe as she caresses me, sweetly. “You can.”

“That’s right. Never forget that I am your Mistress and your Mistress is a monster. I took you by force from your home and forced you to be my wife.”

Her words arouse me. I squirm as her fingers rub faster over me and I find myself panting, “Yes, yes.”

“And you like it, don’t you? You’re my wife and I own you. I can do anything I want to you.” She puts her lips close to my ear. “And I am a monster. Never forget it. A monster who loves to treat you cruelly.”

I moan with pleasure.

I had been so miserable in that bridle. So cold and uncomfortable and humiliated, but there is a strong dark pleasure blooming inside me at the thought that Blueheart can punish me whenever she chooses, not simply to correct my behaviour, but simply because controlling me gives her pleasure.

She makes love to me slowly. Undoing me completely with her fingers and her tongue. Taking me up and over my crest of pleasure until I am exhausted. The sun is beginning to rise over the treetops when she sends me back to my own room to sleep.

13

# THE HIGH TOWER

I wake late the next morning. When I dress and come down the stairs, Blueheart calls me into her study. A small room on the ground floor with wood-panelled walls and a wide desk topped with green leather. She had been delighted the day I'd cleaned this room, ridding it of the cobwebs that grew in every corner and polishing all the wood with beeswax until it shone.

"Wife," she announces. "I need to go away for a few days. I have some business to attend to over the border in Callander. I will be away from you and your sweet cunny for three days. While I am gone you may continue your work cleaning the upper floors of the castle."

I nod. "Very well, My Lady."

"You will not leave the castle. You will not attempt to open the front doors or find a way through the walls that surround the grounds. The forest is extremely dangerous, especially at this time of year when the weather is growing colder and the wolves are hungry."

"Yes. I see."

"Come closer, wife," Blueheart says, beckoning to me. I walk around her desk and, as soon as I am in reach, she pulls me onto her wide lap. Her thighs are warm through the leather of her breeches. "Now," she says, settling me in place. "One more piece of business."

She rings a bell on her desk and Alton appears in the doorway. "Yes, My Lady?"

"Bring her in please, Alton."

Alton nods and turns away, returning a moment later with Meg.

Meg is pale-faced and shaking as she looks at Blueheart.

Blueheart returns Meg's gaze, then idly snaps her fingers.

Meg clutches her throat. She makes a strangled noise, takes a shaky breath then says. "Thank you, My Lady." Her voice is scratchy and rough like her throat is sore.

"I return your voice because I am dismissing you from my service."

Meg gasps in horror and drops to her knees on the red and gold rug on the floor. She raises her hands. "My Lady, please I have nowhere to go."

"What?" I say, over Meg's begging, "Why? Why would you do such a thing?"

Blueheart looks down at the quivering maid, kneeling on the rug. Then at me, with a sly satisfied smile. This is another lesson, I am sure, another demonstration of her power.

"Don't, I say. Please, she didn't do anything. You know she didn't."

"I'm sorry," Blueheart says, "But I cannot risk my wife's honour."

"At least then, let me give her a letter of introduction to Duke Dulcia. She's a good worker," I look at Meg. "He'll take you in if Lady Blueheart vouches for you."

Blueheart touches my cheek. "My wife is so soft. Very well. I need to call in on the Duke. I will deliver you to him myself."

Meg curtseys, relief on her face. I understand it. What Blueheart was proposing was a life of destitution. "Thank you, My Lady."

That afternoon, after Blueheart and Meg have left, I start work on the upper part of the wide staircase, sweeping and polishing.

I often don't see Blueheart during the day, but it feels different knowing she isn't in the castle. I wonder if she has reached Dulcia yet. I slept on the journey to the castle and I have little idea of how long the journey through the forest truly is.

She left this morning, not on horseback, but in a fine black carriage, she drove herself, with Meg sitting by her side as I waved them off. That would be slower than a horse, I know. Perhaps the journey would take most of the day.

I know this castle can be seen, high on the mountain, from Dulcia town square. I wonder if that goes both ways. If I can see all the way down to Dulcia from anywhere in the castle.

I would love to see a glimpse of Dulcia, perhaps I could even see clearly enough to catch sight of Blueheart's carriage arriving.

The obvious place to be able to see such a thing would be from the windows of the upper floors. I decide to try there first. Perhaps I can even see how far the forest extends. I follow the grand staircase up past the first floor with the bedrooms and up to the higher floors beyond. I am not sure what is up here. More rooms, bed chambers, I expect, more than are ever needed for the meagre number of people in the castle.

The grand staircase ends here, but I know there are more floors. I have seen the castle from the outside and I know how high it reaches. I have to hunt around on this floor and eventually find a flight of backstairs. I know from my experience of grand houses that these probably lead to the servants' quarters. When I climb these stairs and look around I see that I am right. I find myself in a passageway with small, bare bedrooms.

I go into one that seems empty and look out of the small window. But all I can see is forest.

I go back down to the floor below and search some more. I can't find any other stairs that lead anywhere else. I'm close to giving up my search when I find a small wooden door at the end of a long corridor. I open it and find a spiral staircase of stone steps.

Perhaps this will take me even higher. I start climbing. There are so many stone steps winding up and up. I feel like I am climbing and climbing forever.

Eventually, these stairs end in a simple wooden door. I try the iron handle. Locked. I try the handle several times. Frustrated that my long climb had been for nothing.

It won't move at all, no matter how I wiggle the handle or poke at the lock.

It's not until I am walking back down the steps that I realise that I must have climbed the stairs to the top of the High Tower. The tower I was forbidden to climb. I wonder if that rule is because I would be able to catch a glimpse of home from there.

After a solo dinner, I go to bed alone. The first time I have gone to my bed without first being taken by Blueheart. It feels strange. I touch my own cunny to pleasure myself, which I haven't done since I arrived here, and, even after that, it seems to be a long time before I fall asleep.

14

# PERONEL

I don't know how late it is when I sense the figure sitting on my bed. I feel like I have been drifting between waking and sleeping all night. It takes me a while to realise this is not a dream.

But this is not the same woman who visited me before. This woman is dressed in a pink and white lace gown, with bright yellow hair piled on top of her head in a complicated, elegant style. And I know her.

"Peronel?"

"Seri."

"Peronel? Is it really you?"

"Of course, it's me you idiot," Peronel snaps. Which is very much the way she used to speak to me in Dulcia Hall, but her voice sounds strange, thin and distant.

Like the woman who visited me before, Blueheart's first wife, Peronel, is faint and misty, much of my bedchamber visible through her wispy body.

But it's her. It's Peronel.

Or her ghost.

"How are you here, Peronel? You're dead. You died of an illness. Are you a ghost? *Did* you die of an illness?"

"Seri," says Peronel in an even softer voice. "You have climbed to the High Tower. You defied her. You are in more danger than ever. You must leave this place before it's too late. Now is your chance. Maybe your last chance. You have already seen her temper. Her punishments will only get harsher."

I shiver. I remember the day I spent in the scold's bridle. And I know Peronel is right. She will get crueller. Could it be that she will grow more cruel and more angry until she kills me?

"If that's true, how can I leave?" I say. "I told the last ghost that visited me. The door is locked, the grounds are walled and, in any case, the forest is full of hungry wolves."

"You will be safer there than you are here."

" I am Blueheart's wife."

"That didn't save the rest of us and you know it." Peronel's voice is quieter. She is already fading away.

"What happened to the other wives? Really? What happened to you?"

But Peronel has almost gone. I can see the room clearly behind her, her body just a shimmering outline, a trick of the light. But her voice is still clear as she says, "She did."

Peronel has vanished completely when I hear her voice saying one last thing.

"It's behind that door. We're all behind that door."

I climb from the bed and look under it. I look around. There is nothing amiss. No sign that anyone or anything was really here.

Did Peronel really visit me? Were her warnings true? Peronel hated me.

Peronel would never come back from the dead to warn me life was in danger.

*But what's really behind that door at the top of the tower?*

The next day I am so tired I do not want to tackle any cleaning. There are so many rooms on the upper floors and the job seems overwhelming.,

My mind swims with questions. I have tried to ask Blueheart so many times about her other wives. She has never given me an answer.

It feels like something has changed after the visit from the ghost of Peronel. I am uneasy. Without Blueheart around, to tease me and make suggestions about how she will take me to bed and pleasure me, the spell the castle had over me seems to have weakened.

Have I really been so blind? I am a prisoner here, taken by force by someone I know is a monster. Married against my will to someone I am

certain murders her wives.

The castle feels like a threatening prison, even in the rooms I have cleaned and brightened. I spend the day walking around anxiously. I climb, once again, to the top of the High Tower, but that door at the top is still locked.

I bang on it. I call out, “Is anyone in there?”

Could Blueheart’s other wives all really be in there?

I press my ear to it and listen.

Dead?

Or somehow alive? Alive and silenced with magic.

I need to find the key to this door.

Alton still mostly ignores me. She serves me my meals, icy and stern. She will answer me if I ask a question, about the weather or the food, but she does not seem to want to speak to me at all beyond politeness. And I am absolutely certain that anything I ask Alton will be reported to Blueheart. The maids, of course, are silent.

Who else can help me apart from ghosts?

And then there is the forest, closing in all around the castle. The dangerous forest, but is it really more dangerous than the castle at its centre?

Peronel comes again the next night. Once more I wake in the dark to find her sitting on my bed. Her face is pale.

“You need to find a way into that room at the top of the High Tower,” she says again, “Then you will know the truth. You will know you need to run.”

15

# THE SECOND TASK

Blueheart returns the following day. I hear the front door opening as I lie on my bed in the middle of the morning, and then her calling for me, “Wife, wife. Wife, where are you?”

I race to the top of the stairs and drop a curtsey. “My Lady, you are returned.”

“Of course I am, wife,” she grins, bounding up the stairs to me. She grabs my waist and pulls me to her. “How could I stay away from your sweet tits and cunny any longer.”

She kisses me passionately. I feel myself soften in her arms. Her tongue is in my mouth and her hands slide over my body. I’m wearing a gown of silk, the blue-grey colour of the sky over Blueheart Castle. The fabric is thin and her touch seems to burn me through it. Desire lights sparks all over my body. When she breaks the kiss and looks into my eyes, she says, “It is so good to see you, wife. And you seem pleased to see me too,” she’s stroking my thigh, bunching up my silk skirts, higher and higher until she can get her hand under the hem. She touches my bare flesh underneath. She slides her hand between my legs. “Well?”

“Yes, My Lady,” I say, breathless.

Blueheart’s hand skims over my cunny. I gasp. I have been without her touch for three days. I’m half wild with just the suggestion of how she can undo me.

Blueheart leans in and kisses my neck.

“This beautiful place between your legs is so hot and slick for me. I would love to take you to bed right now, my sweet wife. Unfortunately, I think you need to be punished first.”

“What?” I lean back. “Punished? What for?”I go cold inside. My first thought is that she knows. Somehow she knows. I went up to the High Tower.

*Does she know I climbed up there?*

Blueheat says, “You promised me, you would continue your work on my castle in my absence. You told me you were going to be a good obedient wife while I was away and start on the rooms of the upper floors. You have clearly done nothing.” She pauses to think, not seeming to notice the way her words flood me with relief. “Perhaps another task to focus you,” she continues in the same playful tone. “Just to remind you that I expect you to do as I command whether I am present or not.”

She grabs hold of my wrist. The possessive gesture makes my cunny burn with heat.

I look her in the eye. “And if I fail I get a whipping?”

She seems to consider this, but all she says is, “If you fail you will regret it.”

Blueheart drags me to a room at the back of the first floor. I’ve seen it before. I think I’ve explored every room of the castle now, but I never paid this dusty abandoned storeroom much attention. There are many rooms like this in Blueheart Castle.

It’s small and bare except for a pile of wooden crates and a low wooden bench against the wall under a small window set with leaded glass. Blueheart shoves me in through the door, stepping in behind me and whirling me around. She grabs me by the shoulders and looks me up and down, assessing me. It feels for a moment like she’s checking my mind as well as my body. Like she’s reading my thoughts.

Again I wonder if I’ve aroused her suspicions. Perhaps I ought to confess everything to her. Tell her I’ve been dreaming of the ghost of her dead wives. Or that I’ve been up to the High Tower, twice. That I banged on that locked door and called out. That I think her dead wives are hidden there.

And more than that. Something else I am coming to realise. That when she is away from me, I remember where I am and what she did. I remember

that I fear her. But when she touches me, even for a moment, I am completely hers again.

But before I can say a word, if I even was going to say a word, Blueheart takes hold of my bodice and rips off my gown. There's a sharp sound of tearing as the fragile, beautiful silk is wrenched apart in her big hands and it opens at the back and falls from my shoulders.

I stand in front of Blueheart in my corset and stockings.

"Now, you are so underdressed, I cannot allow it. You will make yourself a new gown by this evening," Blueheart says, her voice sharp and cold. So different from how she had sounded a moment ago when she was stroking my body.

"A new gown?" I look around the bare, dusty room. "From what?"

Blueheart doesn't reply. She turns away without another word and leaves the room, slamming the door behind her. I hear the scrape of a key turning in a lock and then her familiar footsteps stamping off down the passageway on the other side of the door.

When I can't hear them anymore, I look around the empty room again. There doesn't seem to be anything in here I could use to make a gown.

I search through the ancient-looking crates in the corner and find the only thing that is even remotely like fabric. An old sack. It's tattered and still has some pieces of barley stuck to it. I shake it out. I can't possibly make a gown from this. There isn't enough. But then I notice my shredded gown on the floor. I also have that. Blueheart didn't say I couldn't use the torn shreds of my gown.

I take a breath. Perhaps this task is actually possible.

I could do nothing, of course. I could fail to do the task and take whatever punishment Blueheart gives me. A whipping or another spell in the scold's bridle in her punishment yard. But I don't want to. I don't want to risk her wrath right now, not when I'm hiding my transgressions from her.

But that's not the only reason.

I want to prove to Blueheart that I am worthy of her. I want to succeed. I want to be taken to her bed and have her delight in my obedience and cleverness. Despite everything I know of her and everything I suspect, I desire her more than anything. I want to be a good wife.

I hunt further through all three of the crates. I gather together anything I think might be useful. There is, I am delighted to find, a needle. Just one. In

an old rusty tin. There are also three candle stubs and a tinderbox, which I might need if I am in here all day.

I don't have any thread, but I think I can pull threads of silk from my ruined gown and use them to sew pieces of the sacking together with fragments of the blue-grey fabric.

I start to work.

It's a difficult and fiddly task. I work all day. The sun goes down and I light the candles, squinting in the dark until my eyes and forehead start to ache.

But my work is good. Or as good as it can be under such circumstances. I fashion a skirt from the torn shards of my gown. A pretty froth of fabric scraps that flares out from my waist, anchored to a band of sacking. It's indecent, barely covering my knees, but I can't help thrilling to the thought that Blueheart will like it. I make a bodice from the rest of the sackcloth, fashioning panels to the same shape as my corset. Fitting tightly to my body in contrast to the skirt. It's low cut, I don't have enough fabric to make anything more modest. But perhaps that is the point. The sacking drapes and frames my tits. I tie a spare strip of the sacking around my neck.

By the time I'm finished, I'm exhausted. My belly is tight with hunger and my mouth is dry. I am sure I have missed supper. I lie on the floor in my gown and wait as my last stub of candle burns out.

In the dark, I almost fall asleep.

When Blueheart opens the door, standing there, holding up a wide heavy candlestick with three candles burning in it, I startle on the floor.

The flickering light of the candles seems unearthly bright. I shield my eyes as Blueheart walks towards me.

"Have you completed your task, wife? Or simply fallen asleep in a pile of rags."

"I did what I could," I say, standing up and showing myself to her.

Blueheart's eyes light up. "Oh," she says. I can hear a gratifying note of lust in her voice. "What a truly slutty creation. I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything else." She pauses. "Your hair is down."

I nod. I had pulled the pins from my hair and used them to fasten the sacking to my corset.

"You remember the rule. You will wear your hair up."

"Yes, My Lady, I am sorry." In haste, with fingers shaking, I take a spare sacking strip and use it to tie up my hair.

Blueheart puts the candlestick down on the floor and comes closer. She runs her fingers over the back of my neck. “A small disobedience,” she coos, pulling me into her arms. “I will take you now, wife.” She runs her hands along the side of my body, letting one of them drift lower to stroke my thigh.

But my whole body aches from the day spent hunched over my sewing. “No, please. I’m too tired. Let me sleep.”

Blueheart laughs. “You dress like this and expect me not to ravish you? You are a fool. You are mine. Mine to take whenever I wish. And when you present yourself like this, what else am I to do?” She strokes my tits with both hands and leans close to kiss my neck.

“Please,” I whimper. “In the morning.”

At this, Blueheart laughs. She puts both hands on my waist and throws me backwards onto the floor. I land on my ass, gasping with the shock of it. Blueheart stares down at me. “I have been away for three days, wife. Away from your body,” as she speaks she kneels down between my legs. “I will have you and now. I was kind enough to resist you for an entire day so you could be appropriately punished and now you seek to deny me my rights.”

“My Lady…” I say as I try to sit up, but Blueheart shoves me roughly back down. My shoulders bang into the floorboards. The floor is dusty and the untreated wood is rough beneath me. I cough, feeling splinters grabbing at my back where it is bare above the raggedy gown.

Blueheart leans over me and grabs both my wrists. She pins them to the floor above my head and kisses me. Her mouth is warm and sweet. She bunches my wrists together in one hand and with the other she rips open the sacking bodice. “Such a fragile creation,” she says. “But I appreciate the effort.”

Moving her head down and releasing my wrists she starts kissing me and biting my tits. “Behave yourself, wife,” she growls against my skin.

Blueheart will take what she wishes. I burn for it.

Still kissing my tits, she reaches down and slides a finger into my cunny barely hidden under the froth of the gown’s skirts. It’s wet for her as always.

With her free hand, she toys with the sacking tied around my neck. “Yes. I like this, I do.” She winds her fingers in it, making it tighten around my throat. I splutter.

Blueheart continues working her fingers inside me, keeping the sacking painfully tight. “You will behave yourself for me, now,” she snarls as she works at my cunny. What she’s doing feels exquisite, and her control of my breathing is making my body hum with intense heat and need, but it is intensified by the things she is saying with me, the way she is taking me whether I am willing or not.

I moan as she snarls in my ear, “You will obey me. You will not want to go so soon the way of all the others I am sure.”

I realise what she has said. That last statement was something more. I feel ice along my spine.

What did she say? Did she just admit to murdering her other wives?

*The way of all the others?*

What else could she mean by that?

Blueheart rips the sacking from around my throat. I gasp as I can finally breathe again.

“Pretty as this is, and much as I adore seeing you collared, I have a better use for it if you are going to be so uncooperative.”

Blueheart grabs my wrists again and uses the sacking strip to tie them together tightly.

And then, for the first time ever in my presence. She stands and removes her breeches.

I gasp at the sight of her body, overwhelmed.

Her thighs are pale and the dusting of hair over them is the same dark colour as the hair on her head. There is more dark hair at her cunny, of course. Glittering a little in the candlelight.

Blueheart steps forward. She stands straddling my face and then lowers herself.

She positions her cunny right on top of my mouth, using a hand to hold my bound wrists in place above my head.

The scent and feel and heat of her are everywhere. I can see nothing. The feel of her soft damp flesh against my face.

Her strong thighs muffle my ears but I hear her distant voice saying, “Serve me well with your tongue now, wife. Make me understand I was right to miss you.”

I moan against her. And lick. I know how to do this and do it well. I am determined to prove my worth to Blueheart. My whole world is darkness

and salty musky heat. My wrists hurt from the tight tie around them and the way Blueheart is leaning her weight down on them.

But I still do a good job, teasing my tongue over the sweet nub at the top of her cunny, feeling as the liquid heat of her floods my mouth and her thighs shiver and tighten around my head.

She cries out and shakes with pleasure as her peak hits her.

When she moves, lifting herself off my face so I can take a deep, desperate breath, my face is sticky with her. The scent of lovemaking is everywhere.

Blueheart lies on her side next to me, still holding my wrists in place on the floor, while her other hand finds my soaking cunny. It only takes a couple of strokes of her skilful fingers before I am spasming to my own peak.

“There now,” Blueheart says in my ear. “I see you were eager for me after all.”

16

# THE POOL IN THE CAVERN

A few days later, I eat breakfast as usual, on Blueheart's wide, leather-covered lap.

"You have proved yourself well, wife," Blueheart says happily as she eats a plate of sausage and barley bread, "I will reward your diligence with a boon. I will allow you today to write a letter to your family in Dulcia."

"My Lady, I have no family in Dulcia."

"None?"

I shake my head, swallowing my own mouthful of food. "I was a foundling," I say. "Found by a servant from Duke Dulcia's household. She brought me back and raised me. She was a mother of sorts, but when I was seven, she died and I began working in Dulcia Hall. Perhaps I do have family, somewhere, but I do not know them."

"My poor sweet wife," Blueheart kisses my temple. "An orphan. Like me, I have no family living. I was my parents' only child and they are long dead. No matter. I have a family now. As do you. I have you and you have me. You are a wife."

"Yes, My Lady. This is my home now. You are my family." I like this thought, but I can't help but wonder about Blueheart's parents. How did they die? But I say nothing.

Blueheart strokes the back of my neck. "Truly, wife, I have such hope for you. I have never felt so hopeful about a wife. I think you may be the one for me, finally. I think we will be happy together for a long time."

“I hope so, My Lady,” I say, cutting into another sausage.

“I really think you will be the one who manages not to disobey me.”

“I would never disobey you, My Lady.”

“I hope so,” Blueheart taps my ass to make me stand up. I do as I am bid and Blueheart says, “A different boon then. You have been cooped up in this castle far too long. We will go out. Somewhere very special.”

This shocks me. The idea of leaving the castle feels strange. “Out?” I say. “Out where?” I have not left this place in over a month.

Blueheart smiles. “You will see.”

I dress in my warm cloak. I watch as Blueheart opens the front door of the castle with a large iron key.

It’s very cold outside. A chill wind blows across the front of the castle. The forest looms dark, only yards away. The black carriage waits for us. Alton sits on the driver’s seat. It seems Blueheart will not be driving the coach herself today. She opens the door of the carriage and I climb in. The inside is very fine with seats covered in padded dark blue leather and brass fittings. Blueheart pulls me close to her on the bench. She smells spicy and good. She’s wearing her usual dark leather breeches, with a loose silk shirt under a fur cloak.

She looks exceptionally handsome. I think idly to myself as the carriage rumbles away from the castle, that if it wasn’t for the fact I was scared she would kill me, she would be the perfect wife.

The carriage doesn’t take the forest path back down towards Dulcia, but swings around the other way, behind the castle and further up into the mountains.

“Where are we going?” I say, still overwhelmed to be leaving the castle.

Blueheart smiles to herself. “You will see.”

“Is it far?”

“No,” says Blueheart. “Not far.”

Less than an hour later, we stop.

Blueheart gets out of the carriage and offers me a hand down. I step out and find we are high on the mountain. There are no trees up here and the wind is wild. Blueheart takes my hand and shows me the castle below. A dark shape squatting on the side of the mountain, beyond that, I can see the dense forest, and even further down, right into the valley, there’s Dulcia.

“You can see all the way to the White Eye River and Morain from here,” Blueheart says over the wind.

“Is it this view what you brought me to see?”

“Ah, no,” says Blueheart, turning to me. The wind whips at her dark hair. “Come this way. It isn’t far.”

We leave the carriage and Alton behind and follow a rocky path a little further up the mountain, it twists and turns and then finishes at the mouth of a cave.

“In here?” I say as Blueheart starts to lead me inside.

“Yes, wife,” she says. And we continue inside.

The cave begins with a small passageway, which then opens up into a larger cavern. There’s a hole high in the roof of it, letting in a golden shaft of sunlight, that shines down on a glittering pool of water.

“Come, wife,” Blueheart says, taking off her cloak. “Swim with me.”

I look at the water with some trepidation. I have swum in the river in Dulcia in the summertime, but never on a day like this. “It’s too cold for swimming, surely?”

“Don’t argue, wife. Take off your clothes.” Blueheart bends to pull off her breeches, revealing her strong thighs and neat cunny with its covering of dark hair.

I can see her naked body more properly than I did that night in the room of my second task. I can see the shape of her ass. Muscled and handsomely shaped from riding.

Despite the cold, I obey her. I start on the fastenings of my gown as Blueheart takes off her shirt. She drops it and I see the shape of her upper body for the first time. Her tits are not small, but neat on her chest. Her powerful wide shoulders frame them perfectly in the elegant structure of her body. Her belly is flat and tight.

Naked, it’s very clear how strong she is, it makes my breath catch.

I drop my gown and start working on the fastenings of my corset. Blueheart is already naked, but my clothes are so complicated. It is a wonder that Blueheart can often get me out of them so quickly when she wants to.

Blueheart steps over to the edge of the water and dives in. I drop my corset and pull off my stockings and by the time Blueheart breaks the surface of the water, I am finally naked.

I walk over to the edge of the pool. I dip my toe into it and gasp.

The water is warm. Almost hot.

I look at Bluehart who is grinning at me. “How is this pool so warm?”

“It’s a hot spring. Water heated deep in the earth for our pleasure. Come now, no more stalling. Swim with me, wife,” she laughs.

I sit down on the rocky edge of the pool and slide into the water. The feel of the sudden rush of heat makes me gasp.

Blueheart swims over and takes me in her arms and kisses me on the tip of my nose. It's all so delicious and warm and good.

We swim together until our skin turns pink and glossy in the heat.

Blueheart takes lazy laps around the pool while I swirl in the warm water, delighted by the way it feels, touching every part of my body. Blueheart swims towards me, water glistening on her strong arms as she powers forward. Her dark hair wet and slicked back from her face. When she reaches me she grabs hold of me, hands sliding over my skin under the water. It’s delicious.

We embrace and kiss. Blueheart touches me, hands roaming all over my bare, slippery skin. The heat seeps deep into my bones, bones that have felt cold for weeks in the dingy castle.

Blueheart cups my tits in each hand and kisses them.

I run the back of my hand across the underside of one of hers and she hisses with delight, drawing me in. I kiss her chest. I kiss each of her tits in turn, licking over her nipples, puckered up in the cold air where they are out of the warm embrace of the heated water.

“My beautiful wife,” Blueheart coos, touching my face. “My beautiful, beautiful wife.”

When I am so warm the heat is too much, I swim over the edge of the pool and pull myself up on the rocky lip. I sit with my legs in the warm water and the chilly cave air refreshing my hot skin. Steam rises from my body.

I lean back and look up at the grey sky through the hole in the cave roof. The colour of unpolished silver.

Blueheart swims over to me and runs a hand up my leg.

I slide my thighs open. Blueheart leans closer and kisses me there. She presses her face to my cunny and licks me teasingly slow. I lean back further until I am lying flat on the rocks. I watch the sky and Blueheart licks over my cunny in soft slow strokes, sliding right down to press her tongue inside me, then up to the spot right at the centre of my body that always makes me gasp and press forward. Her big hands are tight on my thighs, spreading me even wider as she takes me with her cunning mouth.

I gasp, I arch and buck on the ground as I climax hard in her mouth, begging silently at the sky to let me stay like this forever.

I'm cold now. I want to slip back into the water, but Blueheart climbs out, she pulls me right out of the water and as I lie on the rocky edge of the pool, she climbs on top of me, positioning her cunny on my face. I know what she expects by now. Her body warms me as I lick at her. Swooping my tongue over her as she did with me.

She rides my face, grinding me down cruelly into the stone at my back, caring only for her own pleasure.

The rocks skin my flesh and I sob into her cunny. She moans to hear it, sighing out, "Oh yes wife, suffer for my pleasure."

It makes me think of how much she enjoyed whipping me in Dulcia Square. I wonder if she will ever whip me in her castle.

I writhe at the thought, despite having taken my own pleasure a moment ago, I burn with desire quickly, easily. I am trapped by her body. A slave to her pleasure. I will remain like this until she has taken enough from me. No matter if I ache, no matter if I am struggling to breathe. Blueheart may use me as she wishes. And I am glad of it.

I adore being her wife. Her property.

For there is no doubt that Blueheart considers her relationship with me ownership.

And I love it. I love her. I am falling in love with my savage keeper. I have never felt so whole. I have never felt such pleasure.

Blueheart shouts out in joy as she climaxes and rolls off me. She pulls her fur cloak over us as we lie together.

I press close.

"My Lady," I say, nestled close into her side and without even thinking on the words I am saying, I whisper, "I love you."

Blueheart puts a finger to my lips. "No," she says, firmly.

"My Lady?" I say against her finger.

"No. You do not. Do not say that to me again." Blueheart turns away from me.

I touch her shoulder. "What's wrong? You are angry that I love you? I am your wife."

Blueheart whirls back and pins me down naked on the ground. "You are not to fall in love with me, do you understand? That is an order, wife. I am not for that. I am not your sweet lover. I am your owner. You know in your

heart that I am a monster. I am a dark creature and you are mine. You are not safe with me unless you fear and obey me. Love will make you soft. You do not love me."

She stands up.

I feel tears prickling my eyes. "You are cruel, My Lady. Why do you insist I fear you?"

Blueheart stares down at me. "You are pathetic, Seri. I thought you were different, special, even. You claim I murder my wives. I thought you understood, then, the danger you are in, but you are just a silly girl with your ideas of love. I took you from your home. I married you by force. What kind of fool would love someone who did that?"

She pulls on her shirt.

"I did not mean to insult you, My Lady."

"Get dressed," Blueheart snaps at me, pulling on her breeches.

I do as I am bid. Hurt and confused. I dress and we leave the cave and follow the path back to the carriage. Blueheart explains nothing more. I feel sad and angry. I did nothing wrong.

On the journey home, I stare sullenly at Blueheart. She leans over across the carriage and grabs my jaw.

"Stop that. Stop sulking," she spits at me. "I want a pretty, sweet wife, not a frowning harridan." She drops her grip on my jaw and slaps my face.

When we get back to the castle I stalk inside and go straight to my room. I throw myself down on my bed, still angry and confused, and sob for a long time.

Later a maid appears with a tray of supper, which she puts down on the table by the window. She does not say a word, of course, but it seems I am not expected to dine with Blueheart tonight. I eat, hungry from the day's events. But I still feel close to tears

I wonder if Blueheart will invite me to her bed when she retires, but the evening turns to night and I hear nothing more.

I wonder if perhaps she is done with me. That I have stepped over some invisible line with my confession of feelings.

And if I have, will she murder me?

But I think of her holding me on the edge of that warm pool. The cloak covering our naked bodies. The heat rising from the pool, just enough to keep us warm even in the cool air.

Why does Blueheart need me to fear her?

17

# MEG

I wake in the night to find someone sitting on the end of my bed.

Not Peronel again, not even the woman who claimed to be Blueheart's first wife. Someone else, and another person I know.

"Meg?" For a moment, I think that this might just be Meg. That somehow she has been allowed back to the castle and come into my room to tell me. But no. She is like the others. Her body has that same misty quality. My bedchamber is visible behind her.

"Seri," Meg says. "Seri, you are in grave danger."

"Why are you here?" I say, then, a terrible thought strikes me. Meg, are you dead? Did," I swallow, "did Blueheart kill you?"

"I did not make it through the forest," Meg says.

"Because of me?" I say, my voice shaking. "Did Blueheart kill you because of me?"

"Seri, I am here to protect you. This is your last chance."

"My last chance of what."

"To escape. To get away from here before she kills you too. There is no other way. You must leave. Tonight. You must run from this place before she ensnares you. Every time she makes love to you, you fall deeper. Which will surely mean your doom."

"I can't. I can't leave."

Meg looks vexed. "Do you love her?"

Do I? I cannot deny the intensity of my feelings for Blueheart. "I think so."

Meg leans forward and grabs me by the shoulders. None of the ghosts have ever touched me before. Meg seems surprisingly strong. “Seri, this is your final chance. You must flee this feeling before it consumes you. Before it consumes you both.”

“But how can I leave? Even if I wanted to. The castle is locked. Blueheart keeps the key.”

“That is not the only key,” says Meg. “Alton has a set of keys. In the butler’s pantry.”

“Alton, are you sure?” I say. I’m surprised, as I had assumed Blueheart was the only person who had a key to that door, but Alton is the butler. Blueheart sometimes leaves on business. It would make sense for Alton to have a second key. But the door is not my only problem. “But I cannot leave and go into the forest at night. The forest is full of danger.”

“This castle is full of danger.”

“I would not survive out there.”

“You will. You can.” Meg nods frantically. “There is a cottage. Follow the path through the forest. You will reach it in only a few hours. The woman who lives there knows of the monster that is Lady Blueheart. Listen to me, Seri, dear sweet creature. If you run into the forest now, you will face dangers. Wolves, bandits. You may even face a true and mortal risk to your life. But if you stay here, death is certain. Death is certain and you know that is true. Your life is forfeit and your very soul is at risk.”

18

# THE DARK FOREST

I nod at Meg. I know she is right. I am lucky Blueheart did not take me to her bed tonight. I am sure this is why my mind is clearer. Clear enough to know the truth. Blueheart kills her wives. I am certain of this. Whatever I felt at the hot spring matters not.

Loving Blueheart is just another way to put myself in danger. And clearly, she does not feel the same about me.

"Please, Seri," Meg pleads. "You have to go now," as she speaks she starts to fade.

And then she is gone and my mind is made up.

I push back the blankets and climb from the bed. My heart is beating hard, whether from yet another strange encounter with the ghost or from the trepidation I feel about what I'm about to do. I pull on my cloak and boots, light a stub of candle from the fire embers, and creep down to the kitchens.

The castle looks even more eerie after dark. Luckily I have spent so much time here that I know well every board that creaks, every place where the castle seems to sigh as one passes. I keep my distance as I pass Blueheart's door, hugging the wall on the opposite side of the corridor, and take the stairs slowly.

The kitchens are empty. In the butler's pantry, there is a dresser. I search through the drawers and find a bunch of keys. There are very many keys here. But the key to the front door of the castle is easy to identify. It's the biggest of the bunch. A huge iron key with a bow decorated with an interlocked B and H.

I slip it into the pocket of my cloak.

I move gingerly across the entrance hall, willing my booted feet not to make a sound.

When I reach the door, I slide the key into the keyhole and it turns. When I open the door, I realise I have been holding my breath.

I am free.

The night is bitterly cold and I am glad of the cloak, but there is a savage wind and before I have even reached the edge of the forest I am shivering.

There is frost on the ground. The forest is dark as ink and my candle only lights a small circle around me. But the path is wide enough that the uneven ground doesn't trouble me. Owls hoot and I can hear animals scurrying in the undergrowth.

Propelled by fear, I move quickly. Not running, but hoping to reach the cottage I was promised as soon as I can.

Promised by a ghost. A ghost or a dream. Was anything Meg said even real?

Did I imagine her? Invent this whole thing and send myself fleeing through the forest.

Perhaps there is no cottage.

Perhaps I should turn back.

But I do not. I go on. Time passes and I keep going. Going and going. Whether the cottage is real or not, this path leads to Dulcia. I know it does. As long as I stick to the path I won't get lost.

But I am so frightened, in the forest, in the dark. I jump at every sound.

My candle burns so low it singes my frozen fingers. I should have brought more. I curse myself. I left so fast. I left in a kind of frenzy.

Why was I so certain it was the right choice?

Why did I believe Meg, who I am still not certain wasn't a dream?

But I did. I know I did. I was utterly convinced I had to run or die.

Now I'm alone in the dark forest, I wonder if I will regret that decision.

I think of the heat of the hot spring pool. Of Blueheart making love to me on the rocky pool's edge. How warm I'd felt. How safe. How far from the possibility that Blueheart was a danger to me?

My head is swimming. I feel like I can't trust my own thoughts. Is Blueheart bewitching me? Why do I swing from loving her and wanting to be only with her to being certain she will kill me? Is she truly a monster? I

know she can use magic although she has only ever used it in my presence to silence her maids.

Or so I thought.

I remember the Dark Rose Oil she gave me on her first night together. I thought that was a simple aphrodisiac. A tincture to increase my ardour. But was it more than that? Did Blueheart cast some kind of longer-term magic over me with that oil she spread over my lips? I am certain I could still feel its effects the next day. Is that what I've been feeling? Not true love at all. Is that why my heart has been so at odds with itself?

In the dark, as I walk on and my mind fills with these feelings, I fancy I can see things in the trees. Faces. Tongueless mouths.

Owl hoots start to sound like voices.

I hear my name being called, I am certain, "Seri, Seri."

Perhaps that was not Meg in my room but some kind of evil spirit who has sent me to my death out here.

I should have listened to Blueheart.

I should have listened.

"Seri," I hear a voice call to me. Clear as distinct.

"Seri."

"Who's there?" I peer into the dark forest beside the path but I can barely see my own hand in front of my face. There is only a little moonlight here in the trees.

"Who's there?" I say again, thinking I must have imagined the voice.

There's no reply. I walk on but then I hear it again.

"Seri, please. Help me."

This time I recognise the voice.

"Meg?"

"Please, Seri. She left me out here. She left me to die."

I peer into the darkness that surrounds me. "Meg, where are you? I can't see you."

"Seri."

The call seems to be further away.

"Meg," I shout back. "Meg, where are you?"

"She called me a slut, Seri. She said I'd fucked you and for that, I deserved to be left here. She threw me out of her carriage and left me to die here. Seri. Please. Help me."

I whirl around, trying to detect where the call is coming from, but each new cry seems to be from a different direction.

"Meg," I cry out. "Meg, come towards my voice. I'm on the path."

"Seri, I can't. I can't move. I need you to help me."

Hearing that, horror floods through me. She can't move? What did Blueheat do to her?

I step off the path, moving in the direction of that last wail.

Walking is much harder away from the path. Roots snatch at my ankles. I can't see a thing. A branch smacks right into my face. I yelp in pain and feel a warm wetness on my forehead. I think I'm bleeding. "Meg," I call. *"Meg!"*

*"Seri,"* comes the returning voice. It sounds further away.

"Meg, is that really you?"

"Seri," again, this time it seems to come from behind me.

I turn around and realise I don't know where I am. Which way is the path? Where am I?

"Seri," the voice calls again. But it's even further away now, just a whisper in the wind.

I twist and turn as the voice calls again and again. Louder and softer and from all directions.

Owls hoots. A wolf howls but it sounds mercifully far away.

"Meg," I shout out, "Meg, I can't find you."

Surely I would have found her by now if I could hear her from the path.

Perhaps I'm going in circles. In the dark, I cannot tell. I lean against a wide tree trunk.

I sink down to the earth. I'm so tired. I'm so cold. "Meg, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know where you are."

The voice is even more distant. "Seri. Seri."

And I realise it's just the wind rustling in the trees.

There's no Meg. My terrified brain just dreamed it up.

I'm alone. All alone and now I'm lost. Off the path. Lost in the forest in the dark.

I hear the wolf howl again and realise with a jolt of icy fear that it's closer than before.

I've been a fool. I've betrayed Blueheart and now I'm going to die out here in the forest. Frozen to death or eaten by wolves.

If I could just find my way back to the path. I peer into the darkness, trying to make out something more than the overlapping shapes of the trees.

At first, it seems hopeless, but then I see something.

In the distance, there's a light. A light in the middle of the forest.

The cottage. The cottage I was promised.

But how?

If I imagined Meg in the forest surely that means I imagined her, and all of Blueheart's wives, in my bedroom too. And if that is the case, how can the cottage be real? Is that faint light just my mind playing tricks again?

I don't know. But that distant light is all I have.

I stumble towards it. What else can I do?

The light gets brighter as I draw nearer. It is real.

I'm sure it's a candle, a candle burning in a widow.

I stumble on and find myself in a small clearing. The light is still some distance away.

I walk on. It's a little easier going in this space where there are fewer trees. The ground is a crunching bed of twigs under my boots. I pay no heed to the sounds I am making, focussed only on the light and reaching it as soon as I can. I am determined. I have a plan. I will find the cottage, stay safe for the night and in the morning I will ask for directions to the path and follow it back to Blueheart Castle. I will beg Blueheart's forgiveness.

I will tell her about the ghosts I have seen in my room at night. I will let her decide if they are real and how I should be punished.

I'm almost at the edge of the clearing. I can sense the trees looming up again, right in front of me. But it's not far now. I can almost see the shape of the cottage through the trees. I can make out something like smoke rising from the chimney. The sky is lightning. Turning from a deep black to a dark blue. Still dark, but dawn is coming. I will be safe.

But that promise of safety is my last thought before hands grabs me. My back slams into a body behind me and an arm snakes over my shoulders, a blade is pressed icy-cold against my throat.

I scream out in terror and my feet leave the ground as the man holding me lifts me up.

A lantern appears. After so long in the dark the light is dazzling. I screw up my eyes.

A face looms in front of me. Someone is holding me and someone else is behind the lantern in front of my face.

An expression leers at me. I take in stubbled skin. A nasty smile. I can smell them now. Unwashed, stale sweat and I think also, blood.

"What have we here?" says a cruelly mocking male voice. "A fair maiden roaming the Forest of Dulcia at night. Don't you know there are wolves out here?"

"And bandits," says the knife wielder behind me, his mouth close to my ear.

I'm so terrified, I have to force myself to speak. "Please. I'm lost. I don't have any valuables."

The man in front of me reaches out. His ragged sleeve is lit up by the lantern's light. A filthy hand touches me. He pulls my cloak aside and strokes the fine white fabric of my nightgown. "Oh, I think you have at least one valuable, missy. That sweet treasure between your legs."

"We should keep her for Renny," says the one behind me. "Renny will be angry if we soil this one before he's had some fun."

"Yeah," leers the one in front of me. "You'll want to meet Renny. Renny likes to use a knife to fuck pretty maids like you."

They both laugh.

I scream and struggle but they drag me over to a tree and the edge of the clearing.

"No, no, please. Please let me go." I beg as they tear off my cloak and begin to rope me to the tree in my nightgown. Laughing about how pleased Renny will be when he arrives and all the sport they will have with me. Thick coils of rope are pulled tight around my waist and thighs. My arms are pulled back around the tree and roped together. I'm helpless. I try to squirm but I can barely move. The tight ropes rub painfully against my skin. "Please," I wail, "I am the wife of Lady Blueheart, please."

This makes them pause and look at each other. Faces clear in the light from the lantern they have set on the ground.

They grin at each other. The one with the stubbled face steps forward and grabs my jaw. He squeezes my face and says, "The wife of Lady Blueheart, eh? You better not be lying about that, bitch."

"I'm not lying," I manage to say. "She has money. She will pay you richly for my safe return."

"You hear that, Gin? We've found Blueheart's runaway wife. I hear she pays a good ransom for them."

She's paid ransoms for her wives before?

*Blueheart's wives have run away before?*

Gin laughs. "And then, I hear, she cuts their throats and fucks their corpses."

"Renny's gonna be pleased to see you," says the one with the stubbled face. "We're gonna make some nice coin off you. Can't say we won't fuck you first though. Lady Blueheart won't care what state she gets you back in if she plans to kill you anyway."

"No, no, please." I struggle in the rope which earns me nothing except more pain where it burns my skin.

Ransoming me to Blueheart. How angry would that make her? Angry enough to cut my throat? Perhaps. But worse, she will be disappointed. She will know I betrayed her trust and fled the castle.

"Light a fire," says the one with the stubbled face to Gin. "Renny will be another hour yet."

"Please," I beg again, still twisting in the ropes although I know it's hopeless, "please let me go."

The bandit with stubble comes back over to me grinning. "I'm not going to be able to put up with all this whining for a whole hour," he says, pulling a knife from his belt. He pokes at my throat with the tip. "I know one sure way to keep a bitch quiet. But," he slides the knife down the front of my body, slicing my nightdress open, "I want that ransom. And I don't reckon she'll pay as much if she doesn't get to kill you."

I squeal as my nightgown falls open where his blade has sliced it. He pokes at one of my tits with the point of his dagger. "Gin, you reckon Renny would be angry if I sliced her up a bit. Just made her bleed a little."

Gin doesn't reply.

I am shaking with fear.

The bandit turns around. "Gin? Gin, where you got to?"

I look over his shoulder. I can see Gin and I'm sure he can too. The other bandit is lying on the forest floor in front of the lantern. Face down. There's a dark pool of something beside him. I think it must be blood.

He's dead.

"Gin?" the bandit says again, a clear note of fear in his voice.

And then he is grabbed. He is slammed up against the tree I am tied to, his skull hitting the trunk right beside me with a sickening noise.

Blueheart is holding him. She has a blade at his throat. His own large dagger is nowhere to be seen. He must have dropped it in fear.

My heart soars with relief so palpable my head spins with it.

Blueheart. She came for me. She *saved* me.

“How dare you touch my wife,” Blueheart growls into the bandit’s face, “Apologise to her.”

“I’m sorry, please My Lady,” the bandit stammers, “please, I meant to return her to you.”

“Did you really? And in what state? Cunny bleeding from your clumsy blade and your clumsy cock?”

The bandit sounds so terrified I think he might die from fear. “Please,” he stammers, “please have mercy.”

“You expect me to have mercy. You do know who I am?”

“Yes, My Lady. You are Lady Blueheart.”

“Then you should know not to waste your breath begging me for mercy,” Blueheart sneers coldly before slicing the terrified bandit's throat wide open.

I scream as blood splatters me. His body falls and Blueheart kicks it out of the way. “Well now, wife, what has happened to you?” She uses her knife to open the front of my torn nightgown wider, baring my body completely. She looks down at me, then strokes one of my tits with a bloody hand. “So this is how you reward my trust, is it? You slut.”

“Please My Lady, I am sorry.”

“I should leave you out here for the wolves.”

That threat feels horribly real. “Please don’t,” I beg. “Please, they said their leader would be here in an hour.”

Blueheart slides her knife down my body and pokes the flat of it between my legs. “Did they defile you?”

“No, My Lady, they only spoke of it.”

“If they had done it would have been your own fault and you would die for it.” She leans in and kisses my neck, “you are mine, my wife, you disobedient slut.”

“Yes, My Lady,” I sob, “please. I am sorry.”

“What made you do such a foolish thing? What made you decide to betray me?”

My voice shakes. “I’ve been seeing ghosts,” I confess tearfully. “I think they were ghosts. In my bedroom, at night. Women. They came to my room and told me to run. The first one said she was your first wife, the second one was Peronel. The one tonight was Meg.”

Blueheart grabs my face and squeezes. She looks angrier than I have ever seen her. “Why,” she says in a low and terrifying voice, “did you not tell me of this?”

“I thought I dreamed them.”

Blueheart spits on the ground. “You did not,” she says. “Those were not dreams or ghosts.”

“Then what were they?”

“Against the fucking rules,” Blueheart snarls. “Against *her own* rules. Oh, there will be harsh punishments for this.”

“What? What do you mean? Whose rules? Who is she?”

But Blueheat doesn’t answer. She slices through the ropes holding me to the tree and spins me around, pressing my face to the rough bark. I yelp in pain as it grazes my face, but Blueheart ignores this. She ropes my wrists together behind my back. “Please,” I say, “Please, what are you doing?”

“She is not the only one I need to punish,” Blueheart snarls, taking another piece of the rope and shoving it into my mouth, tying it behind my head. “Enough questions from you now, wife. You’ve done enough damage. It might already be too late.”

I grunt as the rope fills my mouth. I try to protest, but my voice is just a muffled sound. I struggle, pulling at the tight ropes around my wrists, but there’s nothing I can do as Blueheart drags me across the clearing and throws me over the back of her horse.

She climbs up after me and together we ride back to Blueheart Castle.

19

# A HARSH LESSON

Outside the castle, Blueheart pulls me down from the horse. My nightgown is still hanging open in rags, my naked body is still smeared with dried blood. She marches me in this state, straight through the entrance hall, to the back of the castle and out into the punishment yard.

She leaves the gag in place as she unties my wrists and locks me into the manacles of the whipping post. I dangle from them, my feet barely touching the ground.

"Please," I grunt into the gag. I sound like an animal.

But if Blueheart can even understand this, she ignores it. "You, wife, are a disgrace. Flaunting yourself in the forest at night like that. You were warned many times. I can only assume you were hoping to be raped by bandits."

"No," I moan into the gag.

"And now I will do what I should have done weeks ago. It's time you learned your place."

Blueheart stamps down from the platform and off into the castle. I know exactly what to expect. It's no surprise when she returns a moment later with a whip.

She walks around in front of me and lets me see it. A long leather strap on a heavy handle. It looks savage.

I whimper into the rope gag as Blueheart moves behind me. She rips the remains of my nightgown down the back, leaving me naked apart from two

strips of fabric hanging from my arms. Covering nothing.

Then I hear her step back further and there is a low whistle as the whip flies.

It takes my breath as it hits my body. I can feel her anger in the force of it. And then the burn. The searing pain of the lash.

This is nothing like the strap I've taken in Dulcia Square before. Even when Blueheart wielded it herself. This is a far more serious whip, and this is a cruel and precise pure pain. It feels personal. I scream into the gag and I hear Blueheart make a single sound. A soft grunt.

She whips me again. Again and again. She whips me hard and I keep screaming into the gag. She lashes me over and over and I feel that anger in every stroke as it hits my back and ass. Each cut is a line of fire. I sob into the gag. I twist in the manacles.

But there's nothing I can do but whimper. I hang limp in the chains, delirious with pain, wondering if she will continue this until it kills me.

"You did this to yourself," Blueheart says. "Never disobey me again." She drops the whip on the platform with a clatter. As she walks towards me she says, "Next time, believe me, it will be worse."

I am unchained and Blueheart half drags, half carries me, still naked, to my chamber, where she dumps me on my bed and leaves me there, locking the door.

I lie there sobbing. My back and ass aflame.

After some time, a maid comes into the room and rubs my wounds with a salve and dresses them. The salve is very soothing and cool. The pain seems to dissolve where it touches me.

But although the pain fades, the guilt remains. I betrayed Blueheart. I hurt her.

Later the maid returns with bread and fruit which I eat.

Hours after that, a bath is brought. I lie on my bed as various maids and Alton too bring in the copper tub, line it with soft linen, then fill it with buckets and buckets of steaming water, heavily scented with herbs.

When it is ready, two maids help me into it. The herbed water stings, but also seems to soothe away the last of the burning.

When I leave the tub a maid appears to apply more salve and says, "Lady Blueheart requests you in her chambers."

I nod. I walk naked from my room to hers. Blueheart sits on her bed. She wears only a silk shirt. Her dark hair is down on her shoulders. Her face

is stern.

I drop to my knees before her. “Please,” I say, keeping my eyes on the floor. “I am sorry, My Lady.”

“I am sure you are, wife. Lean forward. Put your forehead down on the floor so I can see the marks I have left on you.”

I do as I am bid, supplicating myself before here.

Blueheart leans forward and brushes my hair from my neck and upper back so it falls over my head onto the floor. She makes a soft, satisfied noise. “I must admit, those kisses from the lash look good on you. Even better than the marks from the strap.”

“Thank you, My Lady,” I say to the floor. “Please, I am sorry. Please forgive me. I was so scared in the forest.”

“You have been punished,” says Blueheart in measured tones. “I hope you have learned your lesson.”

“Truly, I have.”

“Good, now, sit up, but you can stay there on the floor. Pleasure me.”

I straighten up on my knees to find Blueheart has spread her legs as she sits on the edge of the bed. I shuffle forward on my knees and press my face to her bare cunny. I breathe in the delicious scent of her arousal. I wonder if that arousal is from whipping me or seeing the marks she left.

Blueheart takes hold of my hair with both hands and drags me more firmly in place. I lick at her in simple, long strokes of my tongue and she sighs with pleasure.

She pulls at my hair hard enough to make me gasp against her flesh and I feel her cunny flood with warmth. I lick her faster. I can hardly breathe from how strictly she is holding me in place, but I keep going. I keep going until Blueheart cries out and jolts against me, before finally releasing my face so I can pull back and take a breath.

Blueheart touches my chin. Her face looks soft. “You will have no pleasure tonight,” she says.

I nod. “Yes, My Lady.” My cunny is burning for Blueheart's touch, but I know I have done nothing to deserve it.

“But I do have something for you. I am leaving tomorrow. I have to deal with what has been happening. The castle must be re-warded and made safe. And I do not want to worry for your honour if you wander away again while I am gone.”

“My Lady, I swear I would not—,” I begin, but Blueheart shushes me, covering my lips with a finger. She lifts a bell on her nightstand and rings it.

A moment later, Alton appears. She is holding a purple cushion. On the cushion is a complicated-looking iron item. It looks like a torture device.

“Please My Lady, I thought you said I had taken my punishment.”

“You have,” Blueheart says, standing and taking the device from Alton’s cushion. Alton nods and turns away, leaving without a word. Blueheart says, “This is not punishment. It is a traditional device to protect a wife’s honour. In case you have another adventure with bandits and I am not there to save you.”

“Please, My Lady, I will never go into the forest again.”

“Perhaps,” says Blueheart. “Stand up please.”

I obey, looking at the device in her hands. I can see now it’s a kind of iron girdle. I am instructed to step into it. Blueheart pulls it up so it covers my cunny. She adjusts the metal at my waist and locks it in place.

“There’s a hole in the back,” Blueheart says, tapping the device there. “So you can defecate without any trouble. You’ll have to hope if anyone else tries to rape you they don’t have exotic tastes.” She laughs.

I touch the thing around my waist. I run my fingers over the iron, fitting flush around my waist and between my legs. I cannot touch my cunny at all. I shiver. Being denied the pleasure of my own fingers on my sex is a strange sensation. Frustrating and yet distinctly arousing.

“Please, My Lady, how long must I wear this contraption?”

“Until I return, wife. It will remind you that you belong to me and I will do whatever I choose to put a stop to your sluttish exploits. I hope also that it will deter you from running off into the night. Because without this key you would not get far in this world, I am certain.”

I don’t know what to say. I open my mouth but close it again. I am sure begging would get me nowhere. Blueheart has decided I will wear this contraption. So wear it, I will.

I glance at the small key she has placed on her nightstand. I am sure there is little chance she will leave that key behind.

“Now take yourself to bed, wife. And think about how you will change your behaviour to better please me. And perhaps even, avoid such treatment in future.”

As I turn around, Blueheart slaps me hard on the ass causing the iron locked around my waist to judder.

I moan at the sensation. It's not enough to take me to heights of pleasure, but enough to tease and remind me of what I'm denied.

"I will try, My Lady," I say in what I hope is an obedient tone.

Blueheart presses close to my back, arms around my waist, her chin on my shoulder. "I think, you will be desperate to see me when I return." She slides a flat palm down the front of my body, over the iron waistband and between my legs. I whine to not be able to feel much of anything there. "And when I return, I will tie you down to my bed, drop a little Dark Rose Oil on your lips and torment you for hours before I remove this device and press my mouth between your legs and lick your sweet cunt so slowly you will lose your mind before I allow you to reach your peak."

I whimper. Blueheart laughs and slaps my welted ass as I totter from the room.

I lie in bed and struggle to find a comfortable position to sleep in. My back and ass feel much healed. I am sure the salve I was given and the herbs in my bath had a little magic in them.

Nevertheless, it is more comfortable to lie on my side. But when I do, the evil contraption I wear digs painfully into my hips.

And worse of all, my cunny seems to burn, aching for a touch I cannot give it.

20

# THE SMALL KEY

I wake up amazed that I have managed to fall asleep. I don't forget about the thing I'm wearing for a second. Hard metal, locked to my body. I squirm, but I swear it is even more uncomfortable than the corset I was made to wear for my wedding.

I feel a burn of shame as a silent maid dresses me in a fine white gown.

When I go down to breakfast, the dining room is empty. There is no Blueheart and no Alton. I assume Blueheart has left early on her urgent business. The meal is just fruit and bread.

After breakfast I begin work on the upper floors, instructing the maids. By lunchtime, I have still not seen any sign of Alton. When I go down to the kitchens in search of food, I find some more bread and cheese and fruit has been left out.

Where is Alton, did she go with Blueheart on her business?

The castle feels eerie and empty. When I am worn out from working I go back to the kitchen for more bread for supper and go to bed. Lying in bed, my cunny burns for a touch. I have grown spoiled for pleasure with all of Blueheart's attention. It takes me longer than usual to fall asleep.

Two days pass. Alone with the silent maids and living on bread. Staler and staler bread as the days pass.

I resign myself to wearing the device until Blueheart returns.

Part of me quite likes Blueheart having this control over my body even while she is far away.

I am her wife. I belong to her.

I remember the advice Alton gave me when I first arrived. I want to obey her, save her.

But she whipped me in a temper.

What if she truly is a murderess? I want to commit to Lady Blueheart. I want to be her wife. But how can I do that if I don't know the truth?

I should not. I should accept her just as she is, with the knowledge she wants me to have.

But I cannot.

I need to know.

I adore the way she makes me feel. I love her ruthless control. I even, deep in a dark part of my heart, found myself excited by the way she whipped me so mercilessly.

And she has shown me such intense tenderness.

The hot spring visit. How delighted she always is to see me. Her obsessive attentiveness when it comes to my body.

On the third night I spend alone, I find myself lying awake for hours, tugging at the iron belt, trying to find a way to get my fingers inside it. When I cannot I start poking at the lock. I think of the key Blueheart used.

She certainly took that key with her. But then I think of the keys in the Butler's pantry. There had been so many keys there. And Alton had been the one to bring the belt to Blueheart's chamber. Could there be a spare key to the belt among Alton's keys?

I push the thought aside at first. Alton seems to have left the castle. She probably took her keys with her. And in any case, even if such a key was there, do I really want to disobey Blueheart by removing the device she put on me herself?

But would she even know that I had? I could unlock the belt, pleasure myself and put it back on. I think of how sweet it would feel to trace my fingers between my legs.

I find myself climbing from the bed. Thinking, I will just go and see if the key is there. Once I know, I can decide if I will use it.

I tell myself I do not plan to remove the device, but it would be a comfort to know there was a key to it somewhere in the castle. And to know where it was.

When I walk into the kitchen I am shocked to find Alton there. She's making bread, kneading white fleshy dough on the table. It's the middle of the night. A single candle burns on the large table, casting strange shadows

on her face and her arms as she works in rolled shirt sleeves. I pause. “Oh,” I say, “you’re back?”

“Back?” says Alton, looking up at me. She cocks her head to the side.

“I thought you had gone with Lady Blueheart,” I say as casually as I can to someone who last saw me naked kneeling in front of Blueheart as she prepared to fit me with a chastity device.

“Oh,” says Alton, a strange expression on her pale face. “I was called away. Urgently. I’m back now.”

“Has Lady Blueheart also returned?”

“No,” Alton says, “she will return soon.”

“When I left the castle,” I say, “I took one of your keys to open the front door.”

Alton punches the dough and looks up. “You are wondering what other keys I have.”

I twitch awkwardly, but say, “Yes.”

Alton looks at me. She points to the doorway to her pantry. “You know where my keys are kept, I am sure. Why don’t you go and see what’s there? The one you want is very small.”

I nod sheepishly. I’m surprised. Is Alton *helping* me? “I hope you didn’t get into any trouble for what happened because I took your key.”

“Not at all, my dear,” says Alton with a smile. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen her smile. “Lady Blueheart understood that was all your doing.”

“Very well,” I say. “Good,” slightly taken aback as this is the nicest thing Alton has ever said to me.

I go into the pantry and open the same drawer in the dresser. I pull out the huge bunch of keys. The large key to the front door is there. I took that key into the forest. But now it’s back. Blueheart must have brought my cloak back and found it in the pocket. I flick through the rest of them, trying to remember exactly what the key I saw on Blueheart’s nightstand looked like.

I stop at the smallest one.

I’m not sure if it is quite right, but my memories of the night before Blueheart left are hazy and this is the only key that I think could possibly be the one.

I slip it up my sleeve and walk back into the kitchen.

“Lady Seri,” says Alton. “A word of advice.”

I freeze, thinking she must know about the key I took.

“Yes, Alton.”

“Please be careful. This could be your last chance.”

“Last chance for what?”

“I’m sorry. My Lady. It’s very late. You ought to be in bed.”

“Yes,” I say, confused. “I’m going now.”

I hurry back to my chamber.

I lie on my bed and spread my legs. I put the key against the lock on the device. It does not fit at all. It is far too thick for the tiny lock.

I look at it. This key is strange. It seems to glow with soft magic. I feel I hear a voice, voices, somewhere in the castle calling my name. “Seri, Seri.”

And I know what lock the key I hold does fit.

21

# THE OTHER WIVES

I don't stop to think, I move on instinct. I slip the key into my pocket, pick up my candle again and find my way to the spiral staircase that leads to the top of the High Tower. I climb the steps to the top.

My heart is beating hard as I slide the tiny key into the lock.

It opens with a snick.

The door creaks and opens dragging cobwebs. Cool air hits my face, stale and damp, more like the scent of a cellar room than one at the top of a High Tower.

The room is completely dark inside, if it has a window at all it is definitely shuttered.

I think of the time I came here before. Wanting to see if I could see all the way to Dulcia.

That seems so long ago.

I know a view of Dulcia is not what awaits me in this room.

I step inside.

The floor of the room is sticky underfoot.

I cannot think what can be covering the floor.

I lift the candle to light the tiny room. And I gasp at what I see. Whatever I imagined, it wasn't this. The tiny key drops from my shaking hand and lands on the floor with a slick squelch.

The room is full of bodies.

The room contains the bodies of Blueheart's dead wives.

They lie on the floor. All of them naked. And all of them have their throats slit in dark lines, red-black with dry blood, old blood marks each of their necks.

I see Peronel. Her sweet face and blonde hair. Her expression twisted and wrong. She did not die of pox. She died from a blade to the throat.

The substance on the floor is more blood. A lake of it. All over the floor.

This cannot be real. Some of these bodies are years old, decades, even.

What dark magic is this?

I have never seen anything so foul.

My head is swimming as I bend down to pick up the keys. My bare feet and the hem of my nightgown are stained red.

I step out of the room and slam and relock the door.

I fly back to my room. I strip off my soiled nightgown and hide it right at the back of my wardrobe.

Once I am dressed in fresh clothes, I turn my attention to the key. If I clean it and replace it, perhaps it will not be missed. I take out a handkerchief and wipe it. But the blood will not wipe away. No matter how I try, no matter how frantically I rub over it, the blood is still there.

If Blueheart sees this key, she will know what I have done. She will kill me. I will join those bodies in that tower room.

22

# THE WAITING

I should run. I should get out now, but the thought of returning to the forest at night makes me almost vomit with fear. Instead, I lock my bedroom door. I will wait, I think, I will wait until dawn and then I will flee. I will take the iron key from Alton's dresser again, and I will flee.

I will get through the forest in daylight somehow. I will survive the wolves and bandits who will surely be less active during the day. I will not imagine strange ghosts are calling to me from the dark and stray from the path. I will ignore anything I hear.

I will arrive in Dulcia and throw myself on the Duke's mercy. I will tell him of the fate of his daughter Peronel and I will urge him to gather the townspeople of Dulcia to march on Blueheart Castle and overthrow Lady Blueheart as a murderess.

I sit down on my bed. I try to rest, but I can't get the thought of that room out of my mind. I stand up and pace around.

It's true, I think, it's all true. She murders her wives.

As soon as the dawn starts to light the sky, pink and gold, I start to make ready. I dress in my warm fur cloak and sturdy boots.

But as I do, I hear familiar footsteps coming up the stairs. Then, a banging on my door.

Blueheart. She has returned.

"Wife. Wife," she calls out. "Wife, I am returned. I demand you come to my bed immediately. Wife, you will come now."

I know Blueheart has a key to this room. If I refuse her I won't keep her out.

I slip off the cloak and boots and open the door. Blueheart grins at me. I blink, she looks like a demon. I startle, trying hard to swallow my fear. What is standing before me is a monster.

"My beautiful wife," she exclaims. "How I have missed you."

She grabs me and kisses me. Her mouth tastes sour, foul, but I let her. I must not let her know anything is changed. I let her shove her tongue into my mouth even as she disgusts me. I had come here disgusted by Lady Blueheart, certain she murdered her wives, and somehow she had convinced me otherwise. She had bewitched me with the way she made love to my body and the strange potions she fed me. I had forgotten myself. It took that room, and those hideous bodies, to remind me what Blueheart is, what I always knew.

Blueheart shoves a hand between my legs and runs her fingers over the iron panel that covers my cunny. Strangely, despite all my certain thoughts about my revulsion for Blueheart, my traitorous body still responds.

"Please," I find myself sobbing against Blueheart's lips.

"Your poor sweet cunt is frustrated," Blueheart coos, sounding very pleased about it.

"Yes, My Lady."

"Fret not, sweet wife, I will do as I promised. I will take you to bed, tie you down and torment you until you are half mad."

"Now?" I say hoarsely, wondering how I can stand to go to Blueheart's bed now, knowing what I know. "You will not wait until tonight?"

"I cannot, my sweet slut," Blueheart says. She kisses my head. "And I am sure your desperate hole will not wait. I have ridden through the forest all night eager to use my mouth on you."

I swallow. "Then, My Lady", I say sweetly, "let us go"

A plan is forming. If I can just make it through this, as soon as Blueheart is done with me, the sun will be fully risen and I will run.

Blueheart takes my hand and leads me to her bedchamber. It feels a little like my first time there.

That first night. When I was certain Blueheart was a murderer and wanted desperately to be anywhere else. It has come full circle. I am back there. The difference tonight is, I have to hide those feelings.

She looks monstrous. Her face a skull, her eyes burnt black pits, as she pushes me down on her bed. She grins.

“After three days locked in that belt, I am sure you are feeling desperate.” She reaches for my hand and kisses it.

“Yes, My Lady.”

Blueheart licks my hand. Her tongue flickers suggestively in the valley between my first and middle fingers.

As ever, my body responds.

I whimper.

She licks again and laughs. “Perhaps, wife, I will keep your cunt locked away and teach you to reach your peak just from this.”

I am burning. It feels like what she suggests is possible.

“My Lady, of course, if you wish.”

“Ah yes, very obedient. You please me, wife. But another time.” She kisses my knuckles. “ I cannot bear your face so downcast any longer. I must have you.”

I shudder with horror as Blueheart chains me down like she did the first night. And like that first night, she dabs a little Dark Rose Oil on my lips to increase my pleasure. A feeling that I think might send me half mad as I gasp and writhe on the bed. Unable to help myself as waves of arousal rock my body.

Blueheart strokes down my naked body. Her fingertips feel like the sweetest fire. When she reaches the device locked to my body, she removes it, using a key she wears on a chain around her neck.

I sigh with a wild wave of relief as the belt is removed. I almost want to cry, it feels so good.

“Oh look at this desperate cunny,” Blueheart says, her voice full of delight. “So wet and swollen? How often do you pleasure yourself, wife, that just a few days of denial has brought you to such a state?”

“Please,” I moan. Dark Rose Oil is boiling my blood. Desire is overwhelming. This woman is a monster, I know that for sure, I saw those bodies, and yet, all I want is for her to touch me, to make love to me. I whimper.

“I think you’d probably reach a peak if I just blew on you,” Blueheart coos.

She smirks, ducks her head between my legs and blows gently on me. I whine. Having her mouth so close and not touching me is sheer torture.

“My beautiful wife. You have never looked so beautiful to me than you do now. Truly exquisite as you beg for me to fuck you. I’m going to use another device now, wife. I’m going to use a phallus to take you.”

Blueheart kneels up. She reaches for the cupboard at the base of her nightstand and brings from it a tangle of leather straps, like a horse's bridle, but when she arranges the straps correctly, she slides them on like another girdle. Although I suspect this one is meant for something very different.

Chained down naked on the bed, and half-drunk on my own arousal, I watch her in a dazed state.

Next, from the cupboard, she produces a stout phallus. It appears to also be made of leather. Stuffed firmly so it is stiff and when Blueheart threads it through a ring at the front of her harness, it stands up proudly.

I gasp at the sight of my Mistress with a male member between her legs.

Blueheart grins. “You will enjoy this, wife, I am certain,” and positions herself between my legs. She touches my cunny. I cry out. Just a glaze of her fingertips has me spasming with wild pleasure. Blueheart laughs. “Ah, I do not need any oil at all, wife, you are slick as a waterfall for me.”

And with that, she slides the phallus inside.

It feels so, so good. I moan. I buck up, wanting more, but the chains won’t allow me to take it.

Blueheart draws the phallus out again and teases the tip around my entrance. “Ah, you like this. You want it.”

“Yes, please,” I say. I do.

“You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes. Please, please fuck me.”

Blueheart ducks down and kisses my lower belly.

I howl. With frustration. It’s not enough, “I want more. More. Please. My Lady please.”

Blueheart tips her head to one side and looks at me, then slides her phallus halfway into me.

She only pauses a moment before she slips back out. “Greedy hole,” she says. She looks down at my cunny affectionately. Her fingers find and stroke my pleasure point. The jolt from her touch is so intense I feel much as if I would if she had just brushed a lit candle over me.

“Steady there, wife,” Blueheart says.

She fucks in again, slides back and in again, harder. Her thrusting begins to stroke some secret place inside of me that has me moaning and

crying out for more.

As she fucks me, she reaches out again and again strokes my pleasure with her fingers.

I peak sudden and hard, like a bright white flash of moonlight. It's so intense I lose all consciousness; all awareness.

I open my eyes to find Blueheart with a hand tucked under the leather phallus, stroking herself and looking at me. Grunts as she spasms, just at the sight of me.

“Truly,” she says on a gasp as her final waves of pleasure rock through her. “A pure delight.” She pauses, “But you seem thoughtful, wife.”

“I am sorry My Lady, I am simply exhausted from the attention you give me in your bed.”

“Exhausted. I see. I realise I did ask a lot of your sweet body but surely you were well rested, as I note you have not finished cleaning the upper floors as you promised while I was gone.”

“Please My Lady, it proved difficult whilst I was imprisoned in the infernal device.”

“Such complaints,” Blueheart says affectionately and kisses my nose. “Nevertheless after breakfast, I will punish you.”

I freeze. If Blueheart decides I need a morning doing some arduous task, locked in the scold's bridle, or worse, another whipping, I will never escape the castle in time to make it to Dulcia before dusk.

“My Lady please, would you not rather punish me here, in your bed?”

“Do you decide on your own punishments now?”

“Forgive me, My Lady, I simply think it would be more delightful for you, perhaps you could spank me. The cook I used to work under at Dulcia Hall liked to use the strap for laziness. I think we would both enjoy that. If you used the strap until I was weeping, then took your pleasure from my body.”

“What a delight of a wife you are. Very well.” Blueheart leans over me and unchains me from her bed, but only briefly. She simply rolls me onto my belly, before refastening the cuffs at my wrists and ankles. I pull at the chains and moan.

Blueheart reaches across the bed and takes something from her bedside cabinet. A leather strap on a wooden handle. She shows it to me. It’s more savage than the one the cook used at Dulcia Hall, wider and stiffer. I moan with delight at the thought of it.

“You need this, don’t you, wife?”

“Yes,” I moan, thinking, I do. I truly do. I have betrayed Blueheart. I have been in the High Tower and seen her secrets. I have stained that tiny key with the blood of her dead wives.

When Blueheart hits my ass it feels like a thud and then a burn and I feel intense arousal and, even more than that, I feel relief.

I find myself sobbing after only a few blows. Not from the pain, but from the sense that this is what I deserve for being such a faithless wife.

Blueheart says, “A disobedient wife must be punished. Perhaps I ought to strap you nightly to remind you of your duty of obedience.”

This makes me sob harder. “Please, I’ll be good, I’ll be good.”

Blueheart hits me again. And, almost unexpectedly, I spasm with pleasure, gasping out, “My Lady.”

Blueheart drops the strap and strokes her hand over my ass. I have no idea how many she gave me.

“Beautiful,” she coos in my ear. “That’s the Dark Rose Oil. Once it’s in your system, it stays. She turns my head with a finger on my chin and kisses me deeply. I am lost, all I can think is, I need to escape this bed. I need to run. It must be mid-morning now. I need to run.

“Sweet wife,” Blueheart says to me, “Now we must eat. You need your strength. Stay here. I will fetch us food.”

I startle. I had assumed Blueheart would never allow that.

“Surely, My Lady, we cannot eat in your bed?”

“Shush,” Blueheart says as she begins to unchain me. “Wait here, my love.” She slips from the bed and leaves the room.

*My love?*

23

# DISCOVERY

I sigh and lie back. I should eat before I run. I will wait, I think, I will wait and eat and surely after that Blueheart will go to her own duties and I will be free to make my escape.

Blueheart returns with a tray of fruit and bread and tea. She places it down on the bed and climbs in beside me, pulling me onto her lap.

Blueheart feeds me, as she sometimes does at the breakfast table, popping pieces of bread into my mouth, cutting slices of apple and plum and feeding them to me.

When the meal is finally done, Blueheart says, "Oh, wife, much as I would like to keep you in my bed all day. I must attend to business now. Go and dress yourself and make busy with your own duties."

I nod as I slip from her bed and go to my room, finally free. There is no maid present and instead of summoning one, I dress myself in a fresh gown and brush my hair.

I'm smoothing down my skirts when the door between my room and Blueheart's opens.

"Wife," she says, in a suddenly different tone. "I need the key you took."

"The key?"

"When I was down in the kitchens, I noticed one of Alton's keys was missing. The small one. Do you have it?"

"Me?"

"No one else would have taken it."

“Perhaps Alton has taken it. It is her key.”

“Alton?” Blueheart’s mouth twitches. “No.”

“Then one of the maids. I have been instructing them to clean the upper floors. Perhaps one of them thought I meant they ought to clean the High Tower.

Blueheart’s face stiffens. Her voice is slow and cold when she says, “You know that the missing key is the one that unlocks the room at the top of the High Tower?”

I swallow, realising I have made a stupid mistake. “That is the only room I have found that is always locked,” I stammer.

Blueheart’s face is stone. “Are you lying to me, wife?”

There is a pause. I know it’s too late for lies. She knows. Of course, she knows. I fall to my knees, “My Lady, I am sorry. I thought it was the key to the chastity device.”

Blueheart walks across the room towards me where I kneel before my dressing table. She stops in front of me, booted feet spread wide. She takes my chin and lifts it. “I see. Then show me the key and I will know the truth.”

I open and close my mouth once or twice before I say, “I lost it.”

Blueheart slaps my face. It’s a hard blow and it tips me backward. I am shocked by it. I touch my cheek and find it stinging hot. Blueheart has done many more painful things to me, but nothing hurts like this. Her face burns with anger. “Then I will find it, wife. Stay there.”

As I watch, Blueheart begins to rip my bedchamber to pieces. She pulls all the linens off my bed and tears the sheets in half. She upends the mattress.

“Please, no,” I say. “It’s not there.”

“So you know where it is?”

“I never brought it to my room. I lost it on the lower floors.”

“Where is it, Seri?” Blueheart snarls.

I put my face down on the floor and sob. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Blueheart stamps over to the wardrobe opens it and pulls out all of my gowns, tearing some of them. When she finds nothing, she walks back over to me and hauls me off the floor. “Where is it?”

“You can’t see it,” I sob. “Please, you can’t. If you see I will end up in that room myself.”

Blueheart grabs me by the throat. She forces me to my feet. “Tell me where the key is. Right now, Seri.”

She squeezes my throat so hard I choke.

Bluehearts snarling face blurs. Is it tears or am I losing consciousness?

“On top of the wardrobe,” I choke out. My voice comes out wheezy and barely intelligible.

Blueheart loosens her grip on my throat and drops me. I fall and land in a heap on the floor, gasping for breath.

My vision swims. I look over at Blueheart, storming to the wardrobe. It feels like a dream as I watch her find the key. Taking it. Looking at it.

She shouts something at me and I can’t hear her. I feel so suddenly distant and far away. Everything feels slow and soft. I’m going to die now. This is how I die.

I force myself to listen. “...Of course, I should have known you couldn’t be obedient. But I had such hopes for you. You came so close. But I should have known you couldn’t be obedient. None of you can, can you? In the end.”

She’s still over by the wardrobe, holding the bloody key. I’m closer to the door. My whole body feels weak and loose. But this is my only chance. I need to run. I need to run now.

With a rush of energy, I spring to my feet and hurtle out the door and down the stairs. Blueheart screams out in pure rage. She’s coming. She’s right behind me.

The front door will be locked so I don’t even try it. I wish I’d had the presence of mind to take the iron key earlier. There’s only one other way I can go. I turn around and head backwards, towards the kitchens. I race in and find Alton, bending over the stove.

“Ah, Lady Seri. Can I help you?” she says.”

“No, just, can I get out? Can I get out through here?”

“Of course. Just go back there and through into the kitchen garden.”

“Can I get through the gate?”

“Of course,” she says. “It will be locked. You will need this key.” She gives me another iron key with BH carved into it. It is smaller than the large one that opens the front door. I take it with a shaking hand. “Thank you.”

Alton looks at me, “Run,” she says. “Run. Now.”

As soon as that direction is out of her mouth, Blueheart thunders in.

She stops in the kitchen doorway. “You,” she snarls.

I pause. Blueheart isn't talking to me. She's talking to Alton.

"Blueheart," Alton says with a strange note of triumph in her voice. "You really think your wards keep me out. You went to all that trouble to have them recast, you're a joke."

"How dare you," Blueheart snarls. "How dare you come here."

I pause. I should run but I can't understand what is happening. Has Blueheart lost her mind? "My Lady," I say, "that's Alton. The butler."

"It is not. Alton is dead. That is…" She tails off and pulls out a knife from a block on the table.

She advances on Alton.

I have no idea what is going on. Blueheart is going to kill Alton, but I don't know why. Because she thinks Alton is already dead. And I don't have time to stop and find out. This is my chance.

I have to go. Now. I run.

I run as fast as I can out of the back door and into the kitchen garden where neat rows of cabbages and onions sit in beds under a tall apple tree. I find the wall and the metal gate. I almost collapse with relief when the key Alton gave me fits the lock. I open it and run through.

I race around the side of the castle and on. Back into the forest.

24

# THE TRUTH LIES IN THE FOREST

I run on and on. The forest is different during the day. Less threatening. But it still seems darker than it should be. Like a strange grey twilight. Like another world.

I'm so blinded by panic that all I can do is run and run and when I am finally too exhausted, I keep walking, heading down the path to Dulcia. I listen hard. The forest is full of strange sounds, things moving in trees, birds calling. But I do not hear the sound I fear most. I do not hear a horse coming for me.

I do not hear Blueheart riding to kill me.

All I know is panic and fear for my life.

But I reach a clearing that seems familiar. And a large tree that looks like it could be the one I was tied to. It is all so different in the grey light. But if this is where I was attacked by bandits, this is also where I saw the cottage.

Meg's ghost promised me I would find safety there. And whatever that ghost truly was, if she was even real, I have to trust that there was some truth to what she promised because I have no choice.

But it seems like the ghosts I saw were telling me the truth. All they told me has proved true. I have to hope there is a truth in what Meg told me about safety in a cottage in the woods.

I look around. It was easier to spot that light in the darkness. That light in the window. I see no cottage, only trees but I think I can remember where

I had seen that faint candle glow. If I truly had seen a candle that night and not imagined it out of sheer desperation.

I run off the path and into the trees. I still haven't heard Blueheart coming after me since I left the castle. Is she following me? If she had taken a horse she would have caught up with me by now, I am certain. Perhaps she has decided to abandon me to the forest. Perhaps she is still dealing with the situation with Alton, which I do not understand.

She seemed so angry with Alton. I cannot think why. Alton had always seemed so deeply loyal to her.

Except Alton had all but given me the key to the room at the top of the High Tower. And where was Alton, for two days, before I encountered her in the kitchen in the middle of the night?

Blueheart had said that wasn't Alton. That Alton was dead. Then who was in the castle? And what became of the real Alton?

*What does it mean?*

All I can do is keep going.

And then I see it. A cottage. I didn't dream the cottage in my desperate flight through the forest in the dark. It is there. It is real. I race towards it.

It's small, quite charming in a strange contrast to the threatening darkness of the forest. It is low, probably just one room inside. The front door nested under a heavy thatched roof. Beside the door is a window, the window where I saw the candle burning. The cottage has a small area fenced off in front of it. A garden of sorts, herbs and flowers growing. Around one side I can see a goat, tethered to a post, idly chewing at some shrubs.

I feel like crying with relief as I pull open the low gate in the fence and step into the cottage's domain. I hope with all my heart I will find sanctuary here.

When I knock at the door it is opened by the last person I expect.

I step back.

In the cottage doorway, stands Meg.

Meg, dressed in a ragged smock of brown wool.

"Oh," I say, stepping back.

"Good afternoon, my dear," says Meg in a voice that does not sound like her. "I'm glad you finally made it here."

"Blueheart," I say, my voice breathless from my panicked journey through the woods. "Blueheart didn't kill you."

“Of course not,” Meg scoffs. “If she was able to kill me I am sure she would have done it long ago.”

What does this mean? I look at the woman in front of me. This isn’t Meg. “Who are you?” Something about this person, this Meg, is making my skin prickle.

“Me,” says Meg, “oh, I am all sorts of people.” She shakes her head and before my eyes, her face changes. Her hair changes. Standing before me in the cottage doorway is the ghost from my bedroom. The first one I saw. Blueheart’s first wife. She shakes her head again, and she’s Peronel. Again, and she’s Alton.

I swallow.

I step back again. What is happening?

“It was you. In my bedroom? It was always you?”

The woman smiles, with Alton’s face.

“You gave me that key. What *are* you?”

I want to run. I want to run from this. Clearly, this woman is some kind of witch. But then I hear it, the sound I’ve been dreading. Horses hooves. She is coming. What am I more afraid of? Blueheart? Or this witch?

Before I can make that choice, the witch grabs my wrist. Her grip is so tight. I feel like she is grinding the bones of my wrist together. “Get inside, Seri,” she says in a low snarl, pulling me through the door before I can resist.

The witch slams the door behind me. The inside of the cottage is every bit as simple and wholesome as the outside, with bunched herbs drying in the rafters and a wooden rocking chair beside the fire. On that fire is a cauldron, bubbling with something that smells deliciously savoury.

But this place is no sanctuary. I look around with frantic wild eyes. Finally looking back at the witch, who still holds me tight by the wrist.

“You’re a witch,” I say to her in a shaky voice. “You came to my bedchamber as ghosts. You told me to run away from Blueheart. That she would kill me.”

The witch lets go of me and walks across the cottage. “And I wasn’t wrong,” says the witch, taking a seat on the rocking chair beside the fire. As she sits down, she no longer looks like Alton. She wears a new face. But one I have seen before. The woman who was at the wedding. The woman who angered Blueheart so. She has grey hair tied neatly back from her face. Her face is lined with age, but she looks strangely ageless. There is

something unnerving about the way she looks, more than the simple unnervingness of her ability to change her face. “Do sit down,” she points to a second chair. A simple small wooden one, opposite her own rocking chair. I realise I am cold, freezing cold. I fled into the woods in only my silk gown. No cloak or anything else to shield me from the cold.

So I do as I am bid. I walk around the large table in the centre of the cottage and I sit by the fire. As I do the witch says, “That’s better, you must be frozen to the marrow.”

I glance over to the door.

*Is Blueheart coming?*

Was that sound of horses’ hooves even real?

“You found the room didn’t you?” the witch says.

“Yes. You know I did. You gave me the key.”

“And Blueheart knows you saw it?”

“Yes.” I’m sure the witch is only asking me things she already knows.

The witch nods. “That room haunts her.”

“Did she kill all the women in that room?”

The witch stands up and stirs the cauldron. The delicious smell grows even stronger. “Eight dead wives. You have to wonder. But you must understand, my dear, she lives under a cruel curse.”

“A curse?” Blueheart’s rumoured curse. “Is she cursed so all her wives die? Or cursed so she will kill them?”

The witch takes a bowl from the hearth and fills it with soup from the cauldron. She passes it to me.

I look down at it. It is a pale colour, the surface is dotted with green herbs. I am starving and it smells delicious. Nevertheless, I am certain I should not eat it. I set the bowl down next to the hearth.

I look back at the witch, she is watching me, but she says nothing about me setting her soup aside. I say, “What would have happened if I’d made it here that night? Would you have killed me?”

“Kill you? You think I’m your enemy? Poor child. You have no idea what is going on.”

And that is certainly true. Who is this woman? Why has she done so much to try and persuade me to escape Blueheart Castle? Has she been trying to save me? “Tell me about this curse. Was it you? Are you the one who cursed her?”

Witch laughs. “Do you even know who I am, child?”

“I know you’re a witch. A witch who spies on Blueheart. Who takes enough of an interest in her that you find ways into her castle. That you impersonate her staff somehow. That you visited me at night in my room. You can wear the faces of dead people.”

I remember with a jolt of horror, Blueheart saying that Alton was dead. “How did Alton die?” I say. “When did Alton die?”

The witch says, “Are you going to drink your soup?”

“I don’t think so, no.” I look to the window.

*Is Blueheart coming?*

“In that case…” says the witch, standing up and grabbing hold of my wrist again. Her grip is even stronger this time. It feels like iron. As unbreakable as the chains Blueheart uses on me, that I love Blueheart to use on me. I cry out, “No,” but I can’t resist her. I can’t seem to fight back as she wrenches me onto my feet, moves me around and forces me down over the table.

She pulls my wrists into the small of my back and ropes them together, “Please,” I yell out as I try, hopelessly to struggle, “Please, stop. Let me go.”

The witch laughs. “Let you go? Go where? Back into the forest? Back to Blueheart Castle? I don’t think either of those would work out well for you.”

The witch pulls me off the table and marches me, tightly bound, to the back of the cottage, where I see, with horror, is a small cell. A cage with barred walls, set into the corner of the cottage. She opens the barred iron door, throws me inside and locks it with a sparkling jolt of magic that glitters as the cage seals shut

“What are you doing?” I yell out, struggling to my feet. “Is it you? Do you murder Blueheart’s wives?”

The witch settles herself back on her chair by the fire and picks up my bowl of soup. She lifts it to her lips and takes a long sip. “You should have eaten this. It’s very good. When I replaced Alton, I learned a few things.”

“What happened to the real Alton?”

“Blueheart killed her. For letting you escape the castle and run through the forest that night.”

I nod. I think of Blueheart bringing me breakfast this morning. She did that because she knew Alton was dead. “Last night, when I saw Alton in the

kitchen and asked for the key to the chastity device, that was you, wasn't it?"

The witch smiles. "Of course. Who else could it have been?"

"How could you do all this? How could you make me think you were Alton, and Blueheart's first wife, and Peronel and Meg? And you were at the wedding too. You were the woman who spoke to me at my wedding."

"You know, Seri," says the witch thoughtfully, "to harness the amount of power I have it is necessary to make some dark bargains."

"Dark bargains? Like what you did to Blueheart? The curse you put on her?"

"Oh, Lady Blueheart made dark bargains of her own. Magical power has a terrible price, you know. My own dark bargain was made long ago and was extremely powerful. Do you want to know what I did? What I had to do?"

I stare at her through the bars of the cell. "Why would I? What has it to do with me?" My stomach is tight. I am no longer cold but I am so hungry. I should have eaten that soup. This witch is crazy. I am certain of it. Utterly crazy. Why is she using these powers she has to get into Blueheart's castle to spy on her? And what could she possibly want with me?

The witch raises the bowl and takes another long sip. She wipes her mouth with the sleeve of her shabby gown. "More than you think, Seri. So much more."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"I'm not sure that I can."

"Why not?"

"The fact you have survived so long with Blueheart, despite angering her quite frequently, would seem to imply it. I tried to kill you once, long ago, you won't remember. But the fact you survived then seems to have given you… I'm not sure what I'd call it…" She tips her head to one side, observing me. "Some kind of immunity. Which, of course, means I have made a terrible mistake bringing you into this arrangement. When I told you at the wedding you could be the one to break the curse, I had no idea how right I really was. I had no idea of the power I had inadvertently given you. I should have known, perhaps, when you were the only person in Dulcia who suspected Blueheart could be murdering her wives. That was the first sign of it, I think, your immunity to my magic. Your ability to see the truth. All rooted in the fact I failed to kill you."

“What?” I say, confused by what she is saying. “When did you try to kill me? I’ve never seen you before.”

The woman sighs. “As I said, it was long ago. A time you do not remember. But surely you know that once, someone tried to kill you.”

I shake my head at her. “No. I would know.”

The witch nods as realisation dawns on me. “Many years ago I was frustrated with my lack of power. I knew I was destined to be a great witch, but I needed a way to get enough power. I meditated for forty days and nights to be able to speak to my God, and when I did, do you know what he told me to do? What he demanded I sacrifice in order to gain the power I sought?”

I swallow dread. “No,” I say. “Why should I care?”

“My God told me,” says the witch, ignoring my lack of answer to her question, “to have a child. To take a man’s seed and create life in my body. To birth a baby and then kill it. That is an act that can bring immense power.”

I gasp at the horror of it. The witch said this so bluntly. “How could you do such a thing?”

“I did not realise how hard it would be. I was naive. I thought I would do anything for power, but I was wrong. It was harder than I thought. I birthed my babe right here in my cottage. But when I looked upon the bloody, slimy thing, the innocent thing, I found I could not plunge a dagger into it or break its neck. It was so helpless, so pure. Of course, that would be why such an act would give me such power. But I could not do it. I could not bring myself to complete the task despite the fact I could taste the power I wanted. So I found another way.”

Something thuds inside me. A feeling so intense I cannot quite believe it. A feeling that is telling me something that simply cannot be true.

“What did you do with her?” I say, my voice shaking.

“You think it was a girl. Ah, you are right. It was. Perhaps you have guessed what I did.”

“You left her out in the forest. In a clearing. To die on a winter's night.”

“That’s right Seri. But she did not die, did she? She was found.”

“She was. I was. I was found.”

“You were. You were taken in and you survived. But strangely enough, I did still get my power. My act was cruel enough that my God rewarded me.

But my power comes with a condition. You. My power is bound to your life."

"My life? How?"

"You must be miserable, Seri. While you are miserable, my own daughter, miserable due to my cruel abandonment, I am powerful. Luckily for me, you were not found by a wealthy woman who raised you as a little duchess. You were taken in by a cruel servant woman at Dulcia Hall, who raised you to be a servant too. Your life of drudgery suited me well. But over the last few years, I have felt my powers wane. You were more content. You built a life. You rose to the role of chambermaid. A life of hard work, but you were out of the kitchens. You had your lover. Young Luna. Your cruellest tormentor, Peronel, had fallen victim to another piece of my magic and passed away. Your happiness was ruinous to me." She pauses to finish her bowl of soup.

"So I hatched a plan," she continues. "A plan I thought was quite perfect in its neatness. I knew well what Blueheart was and what she did. I thought If I could ensure she took you as her next bride, you would become ensnared in her curse. Miserable for a time and then finally gone. I could not kill you myself. I knew that. But I could send you to your demise."

"You made Blueheart choose me."

"I planted the idea in her head, yes. As you know, I can impersonate people. She tried to visit a psychic in Callandar to ask how to be free of her curse. I simply took the place of that psychic and told her to seek you out at her next Bride Selection. Blueheart can be easy to control when she wants a pretty maiden for her bed. I made her think that you would be the one. The one who would finally break her curse forever. A simple business, for she was quite desperate for some respite from her own web of death. Little did I know, I was telling her the truth. You are immune from her curse."

"What is her curse?"

"Some years ago. After I had left you to die and come into my supreme power, Blueheart came to me. She was a young woman then, perhaps twenty years old. Her father, the old Lord Blueheart, was a tyrant. Cruel and abusive to Blueheart and her mother. Instead of simply running away or poisoning him, that foolish woman wanted to use magic. She's always liked to dabble with power she cannot understand. She enjoys feeling powerful. She made a deal with me to rid herself of her terrible father and inherit his castle and lands. She got what she wanted. Her father caught a sickness and

died a horrible painful death. But a death curse is a terrible thing. And it requires a terrible price. A price she paid when she married her true love and her love was unfaithful. Blueheart found that anyone who caused her any pain at all, any anger, was fated to die of the same horrible sickness that took her father. Because of that curse, the terrible price of what she asked me for. Her mother died too and most of her castle servants. She is volatile. Everyone around her angers her in the end. And then, they die."

I shiver at the horror of it. Something terrible snaps into place. I think about Blueheart's insistence on obedience. Her silent maids. Alton was the only person she trusted not to enrage her and die from it. And even Alton fell victim in the end. She angered Blueheart. Because I stole Alton's key to escape the castle that night.

But haven't I angered Blueheart more than that? Surely I have? If merely being the owner of the key I used was enough to condemn Alton, how could I have escaped?

Am I truly immune from this witch's magic?

I say, "If anyone who angers her is fated to die, surely bringing more people into her household is a cruel act if she is under such a curse? She should stop taking wives."

"She is a Blueheart, the Lord of all the Blueheart lands. The Blueheart family have their own old magic. All the lands that surround the Blue Mountains would wither and die if she shut herself away. No, she must keep trying. Hoping, always to find a wife who can avoid the curse."

"So she doesn't kill the wives herself. The curse does? Then what was the room I saw? The women with their throats cut?"

"That room is merely a shadow. Her rotten heart creates it. But the action it represents is real enough. Blueheart does not let the sickness take them anymore. For its end is long and painful. When it strikes there is a distinctive mark that appears on the back of the victim's neck. A sure sign they are victim to the curse. When Blueheart sees that, she takes a blade to their throats. Just as you saw. And it haunts her. That room is her guilt, her crimes made real by the castle's own old magic." The witch gets up and walks over to the cell. She watches me through the bars. "The longer she lives like this the more her mind crumbles. She dare not love, dare not trust. The more she cares for someone the more easily they can hurt her. The more easily they can fall victim to her curse. She has a quick temper, and her anger means death."

“And you thought if you sent me, she would torment me and you would gain power. And if Blueheart’s curse killed me you would gain even more? But then why not just leave me there to suffer? Why encourage me to run?”

“Because,” the witch says coldly. “You did not suffer. I saw how content you were becoming. You were in love. Your selfish happiness was making me weaker and weaker.”

“Then why not just kill me yourself? You clearly had no problem getting in and out of the castle. Why not just kill me in my sleep?”

“You’re my daughter,” the witch simpers. “How could I?”

“It’s not that simple, is it? You can’t simply kill me, you said so yourself. You weren’t lying when you said you thought you were unable to. You can’t simply kill me and nor can your curse. I have angered Blueheart many times and I am still unmarked and still alive. You have been trying to find a way to get me to enrage her so much she kills me anyway.”

The witch stares at me. She looks almost proud that I have worked it out. Like a mother proud to see her own daughter’s cleverness.

We’re both staring at each other. “You really are my—,”

She’s cut off as the door to the cottage crashes open. I didn’t hear hooves. I didn’t hear anything.

But Blueheart stands in the doorway. Her cloak and dark hair whipped by the wind. Her eyes are flashing with anger as she says, “You will return my wife to me. Right now.”

25

# THE HEART OF LADY BLUEHEART

The witch turns. She laughs. “Oh dear child, really. You still wish to challenge me?”

Blueheart barely waits for her to finish. She charges across the small room. She has a knife in her hand. A knife that she sinks into the witch’s heart.

The witch makes a sound of pure anger. Magic sparks and flashes from her hands. A bolt of it sends Blueheart backwards, lifting her off her feet and sending her crashing into the wall beside the open door.

I gasp with horror, as the witch pulls the knife from her own chest. It is bloody, but she seems unharmed. “Twice in one day? With the same pathetic kitchen knife? Are you really that stupid?”

She walks over to where Blueheart is still in a dazed heap on the cottage floor.

“You should never have come here,” the witch says as she reaches Blueheart. She brandishes the knife as if thinking what to do with it. “You know, I always told you I would kill you if you ever came to my home.”

Blueheart looks up. “I want my wife. Give her to me and I will leave.”

The witch pauses. “I don’t think so. She was mine before she was ever yours. Her being in your possession did not work out well for me. I think I’ll keep her. I am not sure I can kill her directly. But perhaps I can starve her. It’s certainly worth a try.”

Blueheart moves fast. She lunges up and snatches the knife from the witch’s hand and attempts to thrust it into the witch’s heart again.

The witch grabs Blueheart's wrist before the knife touches her. There's a sickening snapping sound and Blueheart screams and drops the knife. Her wrist useless. Broken.

The witch grabs Blueheart by fistfuls of her shirt and slams her against the wall. Holding the knife to her throat.

"You know," the witch growls, "strange forces prevent me from killing your sweet wife. But I *can* kill you. I've always had the ability to kill you, but it was so amusing watching you suffer. All because of your own foolish bargain."

Blueheart roars in anger and knocks the knife away with her good hand. It flies across the cottage room. the witch turns in surprise and Blueheart uses the moment to shove her aside. She runs across the room to my cell and grabs the bars, staring at me. "Wife, my wife," she says urgently, "are you safe? Are you harmed?"

"I'm unharmed, My Lady," I say, shakily. "She can't hurt me. But your wrist is broken."

Blueheart brushes this concern aside. "It matters not. I will free you." She wrenches at the door to the cage. She is so strong I think if it had been any kind of ordinary door, it would have broken, but it holds fast. "This is a spelt lock," she mutters. "I cannot break it."

From where she stands, still over by the door, the witch says, "Oh, take her then, if you want her so much."

She waves her hand in the air and the cell door makes a clicking noise and opens.

Blueheart tears it wide and lunges into the cell, grabbing hold of my arm. "Come wife," she says, "come now."

"No," I say. "No, don't."

It's a trap. I know it. But I don't stop her fast enough.

The witch blasts another bolt of magic at Blueheart as she takes hold of me knocking her forward, into me and into the wall at my back. A second blast follows, hitting the door, which slams shut. The magic lock snicks.

The witch laughs, as Blueheart turns around with a roar of rage. She slams into the bars.

"And now, my dear Blueheart," says the witch. "I believe our dance is at an end. I cannot kill your wife, but you can. Kill her for me. I know you burn to cut that pretty throat. What's one more dead wife?" She picks across the cottage and finds Blueheart's knife. She waves her hand over it and it

vanishes, reappearing in Blueheart's grasp. "Now, kill her. Kill her, Blueheart. Like you killed all the others. Do this for me and I will free you from the curse I placed on you all those years ago. Rid me of my daughter and the limitations on my magical powers."

Blueheart ignores this. She drops the knife on the floor. It clangs as she puts her hand on my face. She kisses me. "My love," she says softly, "are you sure that evil creature did not harm you?"

I shake my head. Blueheart holds me tight. The scent of her body is overwhelming and good.

The witch stalks over. She comes close to the bars. Her face is fixed with anger. "I gave you an order, Blueheart," she snarls. "I offered you your freedom. Kill that bitch. Do it, Blueheart. Do it now. Or you will both die here."

Blueheart turns to the witch. "She is my wife."

"If you kill me," I say shakily, "your curse will be over. You would be free. You've sacrificed eight other women to it. Why not me?"

"Because I can't. I…"Blueheart looks into my eyes. "Seri. My wife, My beautiful wife."

"Then you can die here yourself," The witch snaps. "You can die, Blueheart, and your new wife can watch you burn."

She sends a bolt of magic into the fire, which seems to bounce back, roaring into the cottage room. The chairs by the fire ignite, the table catches and the straw on the floor. The thatched roof will be aflame in a moment.

I look at the witch, horrified, and as I do, she vanishes.

I look back at Blueheart. "I don't know if this fire will really kill me. I don't think she can kill me."

"I think she can kill *me*."

"You know I'm her daughter. The daughter of the woman who cursed you."

"Yes," says Blueheart. "I know. When it became clear the curse would not kill you after you ran into the forest. No wife had ever angered me so much. After that, I knew who you must be. The only person who could be immune from my curse."

Blueheart seems to have worked it out herself, but I garble out the story anyway. I don't know what else to do as we huddle at the back of the cell, as far away from the fire as we can get. "She said she made a deal with some kind of evil God to get her magic. She had to sacrifice me. When I

was born she tried to leave me out in the forest to die. But I was found. That's how I ended up in Dulcia Hall. A foundling. She thought she had failed but it turns out she has her power as long as I am miserable."

"That's why she persuaded me to marry you. To make you miserable? Yes?"

"Yes. She did not know your curse couldn't kill me. She thought it would destroy me like all the others. And when you did not make me miserable, she tried to get me to run away so either the curse would end me or you would, in anger. She tricked me into running away because I was too happy. She disguised herself as your wives and as Meg. When the curse did not kill me after the forest, she disguised herself as Alton and gave me the key to the High Tower, in the hope that would anger you enough that you would kill me anyway."

"She thought sending you to me would make you miserable, but it made you so happy her plan failed?" Blueheart says this with a soft smile. "Only you could be made happy by the way I treated you." She strokes my face.

I think she might kiss me, but the fire is raging now. Smoke is entering the cell. Above the barred wall I can see the roof smouldering.

Something dawns on me as I look into Blueheart's eyes. An idea of escape. A chance.

"That lock is magical," I say. "It's her magic that is keeping it locked."

"Wife?" Blueheart says, but I see it in her face. She sees it too.

"Her magic is bound to my misery. If you made me happy. Really happy in one moment. All at once. Do you think she'd lose all of her magic?"

"How do I make you happy?" Blueheart says, coughing a little as the smoke starts to twine around her. We don't have long. Not long at all.

"My Lady, try."

Blueheart takes my face in her hands, she hisses as she uses her broken wrist. She leans close and kisses me, gentle and soft, then whispers, "Seri, my wife."

Around us, the flames seem to flicker. The smoke fades. It's something. It's had an effect. But not enough.

"My Lady," I say, "You need to do more than that. More than you've done before. I love you. Do you love me?"

Blueheart looks pained. "I…"

"Please. If it is true, and only if it's true, but if it's true, say it. Say it and save us. Nothing would make me happier than to know you love me. It will

destroy her."

"Wife," Blueheart says, voice cracking with emotion.." My beautiful wife. I love you. I love you with all my heart."

She leans in and kisses me. My heart soars with joy. Pure joy like I have never felt in my life.

Magic swirls. Magic so strong it seems to lift us both into the air. Everything else fades away. Not just the fire, but the cell, the cottage, everything around us. It was all magic. And now, all destroyed.

We're both standing in the forest, in twilight. Snow is falling all around us.

Blueheart grabs my waist and drags me into a drift of snow. We roll in it, feeling the sweet relief of the cold. Still coughing and spluttering from the smoke.

"Where did she go?" Blueheart says looking around.

"There's no sign of her. Perhaps she ran."

"Perhaps she is dead," Blueheart says.

"If she is, does that mean you're free? Your curse is over?"

"I'm not sure, wife," Blueheart says, smiling. "Perhaps you should be obedient to me just in case."

"We know I am immune from her curse."

Blueheart laughs and kisses me, pressing me down in the snow. She kisses my chin, then begins kissing her way down my body.

"Please, My Lady," I begin, "Would you make love to me here? Outside in the snow?"

"Silence, wife," Blueheart says as she lifts the skirts of my gown and kisses me on the cunny.

26

# THE SWEETEST SUFFERING

I'm in Blueheart's bedchamber, in her bed. It's late afternoon. Two moons have come and gone since we escaped the witch's cottage. Blueheart says she thinks her curse is gone, and that when we destroyed the witch's magic she crumbled too.

Alton and Meg were the last victims of Blueheart's curse.

"We don't know how old the witch was. Perhaps she was ancient, kept alive by magic. Perhaps the bargain she made with that evil God about gaining power from your suffering was one of many, that she had done many evil rites over the years and she needed that bargain to keep herself alive."

I lift my head and kiss Blueheart on her sharp jawline. "All that time. All you had to do to kill her was love me."

Blueheart smiles and leans down to bury me with a deep kiss. "I had to find you first," she murmurs.

And now I lie in her bed. In chains.

We have not tired of the chains.

Or the whip.

Or her giving orders and expecting my obedience. Blueheart has explained that, at the start, she punished me for any transgression, because she had learned that sometimes if she punished her wives, it contained her anger enough that the curse didn't manifest. At least for a while. The curse will never strike me, no matter what, but I still get punished any time Blueheart thinks I deserve it.

But I get as much pleasure as I do punishment, and right now, I'm getting pleasure. More pleasure than I ever knew was possible.

I moan as Blueheart traces her fingers over my body, taut and helpless in her chains. She leans down and kisses my neck. I whimper as she licks and sucks marks there.

My legs are pulled wide apart, exposing me. I burn for her to touch me there.

Blueheart lifts her head from my shoulder. "Now, dear wife," she says, picking up the bottle of Dark Rose Oil. It's half empty now.

Blueheart puts a couple of drops onto her fingers. The first two fingers of her strong right hand. Her wrist healed quickly and well. Blueheart explained that, as I suspected, the castle has some healing magic.

I moan and open my mouth, thinking she plans to slide those slippery fingers between my lips and intoxicate me with her sweet oil like she has many times before.

"No, no, my sweet wife," Blueheart says, looking at my open mouth with lusty eyes. "This is something new."

She reaches down and slips her oiled fingers across my lower belly, then traces them over my inner thighs. As she touches me, sensation sparkles along my flesh like tiny peaks of pleasure.

I gasp and moan.

Blueheart leans down, kisses me briefly enough to make me whimper for more and chuckles into my mouth. "Sweet wife, you will reach such heights of pleasure tonight you will beg me to stop." She turns and picks up something else. "Or you will try."

She turns back, holding the gag. The gag I wore for our wedding.

My cunny pulses. But I still beg, twisting in the chains. "No, no please." But Blueheart ignores me. She forces the leather pad into my mouth and reaches behind my head to buckle it in place.

I know now, that I was gagged for my wedding because Blueheart was so concerned about my willfulness, that she thought if I wasn't silenced I would be curse-marked before the ceremony ended.

Now she gags me just for her own pleasure at making me all the more helpless. The thought of that, of Blueheart's deep streak of sadism, makes me moan into the leather pad.

Blueheart holds up the Dark Rose Oil bottle again, and I watch as she pours more oil all over her hand. It glitters in the winter sunlight through

the window.

That hand then slides between my legs. So much Dark Rose Oil, all at once, on my slick skin. It's too much. It burns. I scream into the gag, but only for a second. The burning gives way to the most intense sensations as if my cunny has become twenty times more sensitive.

"Please," I moan. It's just a muffled grunt in the gag, but I can't stop. "Please, please, please."

What am I begging for? Do I want her to stop or do I want more?

Not that it matters. I have no control.

Blueheart slides two fingers inside me. I explode almost instantly. And it doesn't stop. My pleasure peaks and peaks again as she slides her fingers out and then inside me again.

My vision blurs. I'm drowning in pleasure.

I'll drown with her forever.

My Lady.

My Blueheart.

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

I had such a wonderful time with Seri and Blueheart's story. If you did too, please leave me a review or a rating. I really appreciate it so much.

If you want to get in touch you can email me on edie@ediemarr.co.uk

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edie Marr lives in Brighton with a dog called Agatha.